

L283-2 (3)

Keep Your Card in This Pocket

Books will be issued only on presentation of proper library cards.

Unless labeled otherwise, books may be retained for two weeks. Borrowers finding books marked, defaced or mutilated are expected to report same at library desk; otherwise the last borrower will be held responsible for all imperfections discovered.

The card holder is responsible for all books drawn on this card.

Penalty for over-due books 2c a day plus cost of notices.

Lost cards and change of residence must be reported promptly.



Public Library
Kansas City, Mo.

Keep Your Card in This Pocket

BERKOWITZ ENVELOPE CO., K. C., MO.



DATE DUE

11/10/1945			
01			
19			
42			
25			
15			
1941 MAY 14			
1946			
JUN 7 1946			
JUL 4 1946			
JUL 12 1946			
MAY 147			
JUN 4 1979			

Dark Medallion



A NOVEL BY

DOROTHY LANGLEY



Simon and Schuster, New York, 1945

ABOUT THE APPEARANCE OF BOOKS IN WARTIME

A ruling by the War Production Board has curtailed the use of paper by book publishers.

In line with this ruling and in order to conserve materials and manpower, we are co-operating by:

1. Using lighter-weight paper, which reduces the bulk of our books substantially.
2. Printing books with smaller margins and with more words to each page. Result: fewer pages per book.

Slimmer and smaller books save paper and plate metal and labor. We are sure that readers will understand the publishers' desire to co-operate as fully as possible with the objectives of the War Production Board and our government.

Second Printing

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
INCLUDING THE RIGHT OF REPRODUCTION
IN WHOLE OR IN PART IN ANY FORM
COPYRIGHT, 1945, BY DOROTHY LANGLEY
PUBLISHED BY SIMON AND SCHUSTER, INC.
ROCKEFELLER CENTER, 1230 SIXTH AVENUE
NEW YORK 20, N. Y.

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY H. WOLFF BOOK MFG. CO., NEW YORK

*To the Beloved Memory
of E. H. R.*

Dark Medallion

IN AFTER YEARS Marcy Crittenden, remembering Cynthia and seeing her own life still rolling and rising to Cynthia's influence like the tidal wave to the moon's, had small difficulty in understanding man's stubborn belief in personal immortality. Centuries, surely, would be needed to quench that spirit's fire. While Marcy lived she would trace life's meaning always back to Aunt, and while memory lived within her she would find her surest refuge in the years now represented to her by a shadowy scene peopled with living figures—a woman, a dog, herself a listening child, and a pattern of silver poplars in a garden.

It was a house of fantasy beside which the silver poplars grew. No man lived in it, for there were only the child and her grandmother and her aunt. Yet sometimes at night the little girl, her sleepy eyes fixed on the giant "1913" of the calendar on the wall, heard a man's voice beyond it. To her the sound was surprising and unfamiliar, and in the morning she would go to her aunt with questions. "Was there a man talking in the other room last night?"

Her aunt's lusterless but intent brown eyes would leave the book that lay in her lap. "Uncle Jay was here," she might say, or "You were dreaming, Marcy."

Marcy could not say, "I was not dreaming," for her life in the tall house set in its great neglected garden was consonant only with a dream. Morning, noon, or night, unless she were elsewhere, she might justly have asked herself whether she woke or slept. Her grandfather, dead twenty years, was said still to thump and

stir about in the north bedroom, dropping his military boots on the floor, first one and then the other, punctually at eleven o'clock each night. But, though Marcy believed that she had heard him many times, the movements of the familiar ghost contributed less to her uncertainty than did those of her aunt and her grandmother, who, although they lived, walked at night like the restless dead.

All through the spring and summer the grass in the garden grew and grew, until by mid-July it was knee-high and feathery with seed. On many a hot night, awakened perhaps by the banging of a broken shutter, Marcy looked from her window and saw one or the other of the women wading through this grass, her full skirts lifted so that she seemed indeed to move like a disembodied spirit, without touching the ground. The immense pine tree at the front gate, restlessly moving and murmuring in the wind, seemed to draw them both; whichever of them had come out—and they never came out together—would turn toward it as toward a comforter and stand for a long time beneath it, while scudding cloud after cloud crossed the moon, and the puzzled child, too weary to watch longer, dropped back on her pillow asleep.

No other little girl's aunt, forty years old, wore her hair always down her back in a long brown braid and refused to leave the house from one year to another, except for an hour or two on Christmas Eve. Marcy's aunt never stirred without a book; she took three weeks to finish a simple school frock for Marcy; yet even the child knew that the books gave her no satisfaction and that it was something beyond indolence that caused her to push her sewing suddenly away from her and begin pacing back and forth across the room or to let her hands fall away from it in her lap while she sank into reverie, smiling strangely and a little expectantly.

No other little girl's aunt went into the parlor alone and played the harp for hours, sometimes for half a day, without stopping.

To Marcy all her life the great gold harp was to be the shape of music; but it was also the shape of fear, and as long as she lived there was fear for her in music. Sometimes she crept into the parlor herself and touched the gleaming strings, for she loved as well as feared the lyric shape; but when she did this the sounds were dull and timbreless. It was as though the strings, being long accustomed to frenzy and despair, could not respond to the passionless touch of a child.

The house had been stately, and hints of long-gone grandeur remained in the noble staircase, the dust-veiled crystal chandeliers, and the scrolled gilt diamonds on the broken crimson wallpaper in the dining room. Only hints, however; the carpets and draperies were worn and colorless, the laces and linens ragged, the silver tarnished and bent. Around three walls of the library, which was used as the living room, tiers of dusty books rose from floor to ceiling. Only the old brown leather library chairs, of all the furniture in the house, escaped the pall of slowly gathering dust, for here Marcy scrambled back and forth in her solitary games, sliding and clambering over their arms and their backs and their uneven slippery cushions; here her aunt sat motionless for hours, her thin hand resting on the sleepy head of her old setter, Reine, lost in her individual dream; here her grandmother in the afternoon, her full black skirts heaped about her, read and pondered her *Christian Herald*. Shadows and dust and long stretches of silence so filled the consciousness of the child Marcy that when on occasion she was taken away from home, and later when she visited in the homes of her schoolmates, the effect on her of the brisk and sparkling colors and smart devices there encountered was like the tinny tinkling of a little bell, interesting but after all meaningless. The other houses seemed to her like stores, marked off in neat lines and angles, filled with novel shapes and colors most enticing, but without a message or an undertone. The other gardens, trimmed and clipped and set out with regularity and precision, looked as though they might be pried up

roots and all in one flat piece to show their cardboard foundation, like the gay green yard of the dolls' house Marcy had seen at Christmas in one of the stores.

Far otherwise the garden at home, where strange things could and did happen. Once Marcy stumbled over a hidden root and fell, and there before her eyes in the grass was a new flower, one she had never seen before; a fairy blossom surely, a new and separate thing. Her aunt said it was a columbine, as though she had heard of it elsewhere and knew all about it; but Marcy was confident that she had not, for she knew that deceiving things are often said to children.

Moreover, an even greater miracle once happened in the garden. Marcy found there a rabbit's egg, with the baby rabbit dead inside it. Aunty said no. Marcy might have dreamed or imagined such a thing, what with Easter on the way, but rabbits did not lay eggs really.

"Then what was the baby rabbit doing inside it?"

Aunty smiled. Her smile, as always, hinted at a secret and personal wisdom. "It wasn't a baby rabbit. If you saw an egg at all with something dead in it, it must have been a little chicken."

Marcy shook her head positively. She could not protest in any more articulate fashion; that was "disputing Aunty's word" and invariably brought an angry threat of punishment, although no punishment had ever followed. "It was a white egg with a blue and gold band," she insisted. "It was broken, and the baby rabbit was dead with some wet stuff around him. I *saw* him."

Aunty smiled again. "You just imagined it."

Marcy was driven to desperation. "I didn't! I saw him!"

"That will do now, young lady. Never mind answering back."

Marcy, outraged, withdrew to the garden. She would show Aunty. She would carry the baby rabbit into the house on a shingle, and then she would have a funeral and bury the poor little thing under the cedar brush. But she could not find him again.

Nevertheless, her belief that she had seen him was not shaken, and she knew that the garden was not like other places. From one side of it to another and all along its high brick wall she ranged, through the tall grasses, under the sweet wet lilacs, among the heavy pink peonies and the snowy bridal wreath and the mysterious dark-flowered calycanthus bushes, listening, waiting, living. Her chubby legs, twinkling among the morning-damp foliage, had usually a feather or two of seed or a few blades of grass clinging to them, and her listening look, clear and direct and a little upward, claimed kindred with everything in the garden. She was nearly always alone, but she looked like a child well companioned and thoroughly satisfied. Her musing expression contrasted oddly with the baby-like roundness of her body and the conventional "long curls" into which her aunt each morning brushed her abundant hair. A barely perceptible dimple at times appeared and disappeared far back in her right cheek as though in response to somebody or something, and it was impossible to believe that the wide, intent gray eyes were fixed on emptiness.

Nor were they. Marcy was not alone; she was never alone. Sometimes her pious grandmother sang to her of another who should not be alone, and she shivered with dire delight at the thrilling words:

*I saw the lightning flashing
And heard the thunder roll;
I felt sin's breakers dashing,
Trying to conquer my soul;
I heard the voice of my Saviour
Telling me still to fight on;
He promised never to leave me,
Never to leave me alone.*

But it was not Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild, who walked beside Marcy among the flowers and the stubble, who stood and watched while Aunty put her to bed, his gray-sleeved elbow hooked casually over the high bedpost and his curving saber at his

side. It was a tall man, red-bearded, with eyes as blue and brilliant as sunlit ice, and there came from him a splendor, a sort of visible authority, which made all others dim beside his path. Even God, the Father of Gentle Jesus, Who wore a broad-brimmed hat against the warmth of the neighboring sun and sometimes thrust forth from a cloud a mighty arm and hand bearing a long scepter to change some earthly destiny, was colorless beside him. This was Grandfather, Aunt's father and Grandma's husband. The "old doctor." Major Clay Alt Crittenden, M.D., C.S.A., dead and in his grave these twenty years.

—2—

AT WHAT time in her life Marcy's grandfather began to attend her as an almost visible influence she was never to know. But certainly the anecdotes about him, with which the whole southeast Missouri village continually rang, reached her in the days of her earliest consciousness, and she could not remember when she had heard any one of them for the first time. His crossed Confederate sabers hung on the wall over the library mantelpiece, under his imposing portrait, and she had often pictured him striding between columns of Yankees with a saber in each hand, cutting them down like weeds. Indeed, she had little doubt of his potential prowess even in conflict with a Personage greater than Yankees. She had a habit of emerging suddenly, with questions, out of a long absorption in her own thoughts, and it was so that she inquired of her aunt on one occasion, "Do you reckon Grandpa could 'a' beat God in a fight?"

Receiving no answer—for Cynthia Crittenden had gone into one of her own prolonged fits of abstraction—Marcy pondered awhile and concluded, aloud: "I reckon God would 'a' beat." She sighed regretfully. "'Twould 'a' been right smart of a fight, though."

Miss Cynthia, roused, spoke with some severity. "Marcy, if you don't pay some attention to the way you speak, you'll have to quit going out to watch Pansy when she comes to do the washing. You're getting so you talk just like a ducky. I won't have it, do you hear?"

Marcy looked stricken. "Pansy's got a scar," she ventured, in the hope of diverting the issue. "A long white one. On the arm. It's where the overseer hit her with his whip when she was a baby."

Her aunt laughed. "What nonsense!"

"He didn't mean to hit Pansy," Marcy explained. "He did it when he was tetchin' up her mammy for not comin' to work——"

"Marcy!"

"For not coming to work," Marcy continued patiently, "because she had a misery—I mean a backache—in her back. And Pansy was on her mammy's lap."

"Pansy's like all darkies; she draws a pretty long bow most of the time." Miss Cynthia rose and gathered up her sewing. "I don't mind your listening to her yarns, as long as you don't pick up her language, but you ought to have sense enough not to believe them. The Negroes were never whipped as long as they behaved themselves. Nobody was going to make Pansy's mammy work if she was really ill. Pa used to say——" Her face changed and she turned abruptly to leave the room.

Marcy, on the alert at the slightest mention of her grandfather, followed her eagerly. "What?" she urged. "What did Grandpa say?"

"Never mind. Go on out and play with Reine; she needs exercise." The habitual haughtiness of Cynthia Crittenden's face was overlaid now with an exceeding bitterness, as it always was when she had been betrayed into speaking of her father without hatred. She made no secret of her detestation of his memory and spoke of him freely enough, sometimes with biting humor, when she was in a rancorous mood; but occasionally, as now, she forgot her-

self and mentioned him as casually as she might have done in the untroubled days of her childhood.

Marcy, seeing her safely out of the room, remained. If her beloved attendant shade eluded her elsewhere, she could usually find him here in the library, where his books and his sabers awaited him. The flitting firelight picked out the gilt titles on the old brown and red and blue and green bindings: a blood-curdling name, SHAKESPEARE; a funny name, DICKENS. Marcy had laughed aloud when first she noticed the latter name, recognizing her grandmother's only expletive; but later, reading of Little Nell, she had wept.

The antique square piano, laden with tattered sheet music and Marcy's exercise books, was here too, and Marcy twirled absently back and forth on the worn red velvet stool, repeating in her mind for the thousandth time the story of how Grandpa, having been elected state senator and wanting to enjoy his new dignity in solitary grandeur for a time, had left Grandma and the three children behind when he went to Jefferson City; and how Grandma, dutifully yielding without a word, had nevertheless made her own plans; and how a few days later, when the new senator, dressed to the nines (in a brand-new Confederate uniform, Marcy supposed, with his sabers polished to a fare-you-well), was promenading in the capital city, he was suddenly confronted there on the street with all four of them, Grandma in her best black taffeta with five flounces, and Auntie in blue panniers, and Uncle Jay and Papa in their round, streamered hats and their leg-tight sailor suits with the gold braid, all looking up at him with round eyes and waiting for him to "get mad" and get it over, so that they might start looking for a place to live; and how Grandpa, for a wonder, did not get mad at all that time, but only said mildly, "Well, I'll be damned. Come along. . . ."

Marcy laughed, figuring to herself Grandpa's countenance with its mingled amusement and chagrin. She had no eyes for Grandma in her brave silk ruffles, or even for the primly dressed chil-

dren; she did not remember the young army captain who had been Papa, and as for Aunty and Uncle Jay they were so firmly and unalterably grown up that it was hard for her to think of them as actual children.

The library door opened, and Marcy started guiltily. Cynthia Crittenden looked at her sternly. "I thought I told you to go out and play."

Marcy said nothing, but slid from the piano stool and waited. Her aunt's eyes softened. She turned the child about and straightened her frock with a caressing motion. "Go up and get the mail now, honey, before you do anything else. Put on your light coat; it's chilly yet. And stop at the drugstore and get my medicine. Mr. Furness will know what to give you."

"Can I go play with Inez when I get back?"

"Let Inez come play with you for a change. Don't keep running over there; have some pride, Marcy. Hurry back, now."

Marcy, who was a plump little girl, struggled with difficulty into last spring's tan serge coat. Miss Crittenden, pausing to help her, lifted the long loose brown curls out from under its velvet collar and gave her a final critical scrutiny. "Hurry back, now," she repeated.

Marcy set forth reluctantly. She had not yet gained that vivid sense of her grandfather's presence with which she liked to begin any day, especially a Saturday when there was no school. Her face brightened at sight of Inez Colton in her yard a little way down the street, angrily chasing a large, lean gray cat away from her mother's chickens. Inez wore a perpetual chip on her shoulder; whatever she was doing, her wiry little body, her sharp, knobbly elbows, and her thin, quick-flushing blonde skin gave her the appearance of an enraged small housewife brandishing a broom. Marcy loved her, beyond reason.

She called to Inez now, after a wary glance backward over her shoulder. "Come over to my house when I get back from the post office?"

Miss Colton tossed her head. "I might and I might not." She stamped her foot at the cat. "Get out o' here, you old cat you, and don't you ever come back in this yard again!" She looked toward Marcy for approbation. "I reckon he'll know better'n to bother our chickens any more. Old fool thing."

"It's Wilsons' old Tom," Marcy said.

Inez bristled. "Well, don't you s'pose I know that? Think you're smart!"

"I have to go to the post office," Marcy pacifically changed the subject. "Come over when I get back?"

"I might and I might not, I told you." Inez turned her back and marched moodily away.

Marcy sighed and set her face toward town. It was early spring. Pools of reflected light like fluid gold lay in the roadside puddles. Old Mr. Champlin, in his invariable black Prince Albert coat and high silk hat, his gold-headed cane in his hand, was approaching at a leisurely pace. A sprig of forsythia decorated his buttonhole, and he walked jauntily, like one aware of the wakening year. Marcy burned with embarrassment. In a moment they would meet, and he would take off his hat and say, "Good morning, Miss Marcy! Good morning!" Every time it happened she wondered how she could possibly live through it; she was sure she could never live through it again. Nearly halted by her confusion, she half stumbled over a knothole in the wooden sidewalk.

Off came the hat. The sunlight swept across the silver hair. "Good morning, Miss Marcy, good morning. A glorious morning!"

It was over. Marcy breathed again. She was glad she had been out of sight of home. Her crimson shyness in the presence of older persons was a constant irritation to Miss Cynthia. "There you stand, as if you hadn't a tongue in your head. What do you suppose people are going to think of you? Or of me, incidentally?"

These questions being obviously rhetorical, Marcy had never attempted to answer them. Placid by nature and brought up in

the serene conviction that the mere fact of her being a Crittenden relieved her of any imaginable concern with what people were going to think, she was not given to worry on this score. It was the mere presence of the adult that disconcerted her—the tallness, the overwhelming sense of confronting and being expected to cope with a being altogether different from herself. She needed time to adjust to this feeling, and before she could take it the thing was over and done with. Marcy sighed again.

Mr. Furness at the drugstore, wrapping up Aunty's medicine, was genial. "And how's all your folks, Miss Crittenden?"

"All right," Marcy managed to say.

"Miss Cynthy holdin' her own?" A spark of curiosity showed in Mr. Furness' bow-spectacled brown eyes. "Don't often see her these days."

Marcy did not reply.

"Well, sir," Mr. Furness continued, "she was a mighty handsome young lady sever'l years ago. Yes, *ma'am!*" He sighed chivalrously. "Handsomest young lady in these parts. High stepper, but that 'uz all right." His eyes, peering over his glasses, followed Marcy as she left the store. "Poor youngun," he said to his clerk.

Marcy overheard the remark but paid it little heed. She was nine now, and for years had been accustomed to hearing herself pitied for her orphaned state. It did not occur to her that Mr. Furness' remark might have any additional significance. She crossed the street and entered the post office.

At sight of George Corby the postmaster, busy at a paper-piled desk, she had a delightful sensation, a sort of pleased wriggle of the mind. He made her think of Grandpa. On one occasion, when Grandpa had somewhat overtaxed even his fabulous capacity for the authoritative juleps of his native region, Mr. Corby had inconsiderately trundled him home to Grandma in a wheelbarrow. The Major had never forgiven this insult to his dignity. Marcy had heard a hundred times of his refusal to recognize Corby on the street, or to speak to him beyond the straitest necessity when

called upon thereafter to attend him in illness; and the legend of his revenge, nine years delayed, was famous throughout three states. Corby had been flung from his horse and was discovered by his implacable enemy lying unconscious by the roadside; whereat the Major, having administered first aid and ordered the patient to lie still until his return, stepped to a near-by farmhouse and requisitioned a wheelbarrow of his own. "Here, sir," he commanded the prostrate Corby. "Get in."

Corby goggled at him. "What for? You got a buggy."

"I'm taking you home personally, George. Jess is only a mare; the honor would be too much for her. She'll stand. Come on, get in. I'll ride you home to Nelly—as soon as we've been two or three times around Courthouse Square."

"Two or three—you go to the devil!" gasped Corby. "If you wait till I get in that wheelbarrow, you'll wait till hell freezes solid."

Marcy, remembering this story as she stood before the mail window in the post office, caught her breath in sudden rapture, feeling the familiar presence at her side. He had come—Grandpa had come at last! The spider crawling down the office wall with its glassed-in pigeonholes, the assistant looking out Grandma's new *Christian Herald* and an advertising letter for Auntie, the broken pane in the post-office window—all had disappeared. She stood beside Grandpa on the roadside, looking down at the fallen Corby of more than twenty-five years ago.

"Marcy, hold my coat," Grandpa said. "Now!" He turned back to Corby; his ice-blue eyes shot chilly fire. "You get in that wheelbarrow," he ordered, "or, by God, sir, I'll throw you in."

Corby looked wildly and helplessly about him, and then, at a sudden threatening gesture from the Major, crawled into the barrow. The Major settled his hat firmly, adjusted his clanking sabers one on each side, picked up the barrow handles, and set off toward town, his beard blowing triumphantly over his shoulder.

MARCY PRANCED home with her grandfather's victory thudding in her breast. Halfway there, she remembered that she had left the mail and Aunty's medicine on the post-office desk, and had to run back for them, but she found them undisturbed where she had left them. She was in high spirits now; one glimpse of the Major made any day for Marcy. Timid and oversensitive, recoiling with an almost pathologic horror from violence of thought, word, or action in the world of reality, she found in the Major's robust and often profane attacks on life a vicarious relief and catharsis that she could obtain in no other way. For there was strength in Marcy—latent, it is true; she was one of those occasional children who are active within and passive without. All her response to the world was hoarded within her.

She had no real friends of her own age. The other children thought her standoffish and "stuck up." "Think you're so smart," they taunted her on the school playground, "just because you're a Crittenden! Just because you skipped a grade! Just because you always get a hundred in spelling! Yah—teacher's pet! Teacher's pet!"

"Hasn't your Aunty got any hairpins, Marcy?" the ringleader, Christine Wilson, would sometimes demand, her pale eyes dancing with malicious enjoyment. "Whyn't she ever do up her hair like anybody else? She must be crazy."

"Because she has a headache if she does it up, that's why," Marcy might attempt to explain.

Christine would whoop with delight. "Hey, kids! Lissen here:

Marcy's Aunty can't comb her own hair! It gives her a headache if she combs her hair!"

"It does not!" Marcy stammered. "It does not, either!"

"You said it did."

"I did not say it did! I said——"

But the derisive howls of her antagonists would always drown her out. Marcy, having no jeers to offer in retaliation, would turn and walk away to keep them from seeing that her eyes were full of tears. Often and again some particular child with whom she had been playing happily before the others came—sometimes even Inez herself—would turn savagely upon her with the rest, and the exquisite dream of friendship she had been building would crumble and fall to nothing.

There can be no doubt that this dream was always too tall and delicate a structure to endure, even under the most favorable circumstances. Marcy's ideas of friendship, chiefly garnered from books, were neither human nor reasonable, they were sublime. She had a great craving for demonstrated affection, but she could not be demonstrative—nor would any of the other children, whose impulses toward affection were duly satisfied in the approximately normal lives they led at home, have understood her if she had been. The imaginative games she liked best were a sealed book to them; they thought her queer and rated her without mercy for her bizarre desire always to "play out of books."

In a city she might have discovered kindred spirits, but in the little Missouri town she had the ill luck to be the only one of her kind. It was a mere matter of the law of averages; the tiny county seat had not more than fifteen hundred inhabitants, and but for the presence and dignity of Courthouse Square and the local offices it afforded there would doubtless have been even fewer. A sleepy, unpunctual little railroad touched the outskirts of the town, but it was a rare train that brought in more than five passengers, and these were usually townspeople who had been on brief shopping trips to Cape Girardeau.

Twice a year there was a mild flurry when the "hat trimmer" imported from St. Louis by the one large general store came in on the twelve-forty and paraded her incredibly urban costumes and her dangerously tilted heels along the business street. Every spring one of the three churches—Methodist, Baptist, and Campbellite—held a protracted revival meeting; every fall the County Stock Show afforded a few days' diversion; and every Fourth of July the whole town turned out for the community picnic at the river a few miles away, enjoying the stimulus of its perfervid oratory.

As oratory celebrating a Federal holiday this was unique, for the town was predominantly Southern, and so far as its first citizens were concerned the Civil War was still going on. Old gentlemen like Mr. Champlin, with stovepipe hats and gold-headed canes, pounded those canes in loud approval as the orator waxed emotional about Jefferson Davis and the boys in gray; soft-voiced but fiery-hearted old ladies in full-skirted black taffeta, spreading the picnic dinner, recounted their own spirited resistance, long ago, to the amorous and sometimes dashing, but of course always contemptible, Yank soldiers. Marcy Crittenden, at seven, had firmly refused to believe that even disreputable old Tom Tolliver, bad as he undoubtedly was, could actually be a Republican to boot. "He's not black at all, Aunty," she had pointed out in all seriousness.

For the rest, the town, picturesque with its shaded streets, its several distinguished old houses, and its mature, sweet-scented gardens, was much like any other village of the same age and traditions—lazy, pleasant, often turbulent below the surface, friendly and malicious by turns. The usual ceaseless gossip went on over its midday dinner tables and its Ladies' Aid quilting bees. Men still considered themselves masters in their own houses, and women had not yet begun to resent letting them think they were. The "new woman," even in 1913, was regarded with suspicion and dislike. Did a daughter of one of the town's good families

have occasion to support herself, she could teach school or music if she liked, without loss of prestige. Anything else was anathema, though "clerking" in a store might be patronizingly approved, with the distinct understanding that the young woman who "clerked" had let herself down a peg or two and would do well to avert further suspicion by walking pretty circumspectly thereafter.

Major Crittenden was frequently quoted on this subject. "As long as a woman's got male relatives to support her, it's an insult to them for her to strike out for herself, teaching or anything else. No man but a spitless bastard without a God-damned drop of red blood in his veins would allow it." And when the daughter of one of his own friends suddenly disappeared in the night, leaving a note to say that she had gone to a St. Louis hospital to study nursing, the Major had stoutly upheld her father in barring his doors against her forever. "Nursing! A nigger wench's job! By God, poor Clybourn. I never felt so sorry for a man in my life. By God, if she'd 'a' been mine, I'd have gone after her and——"

What the Major would have gone after her and done was never known, words having failed him at this point. But it was noted now and then in rehearsal of the tale that the Major, by God, had practiced what he preached. His own daughter had not gone out to make her living. "Maybe if she had—" a daring young woman had once suggested, but under the terrible eye of her husband had got no further.

The Major's grandchild, now on her way home, was untroubled by these troublous issues and was the happier for her recent adventure in his company. She trotted placidly down the one hilly little business street, carefully averting her eyes as she passed the magnificent red-and-white-striped pole that marked the barbershop; in 1913 well-bred little girls were still being warned never to look in the direction of barbershops or livery stables. She paused to poke her toe experimentally into a large knothole in the wooden sidewalk before the butcher's shop, but hurried on when she saw that Mr. Watkins, the butcher, was about to

hail her genially from within. Mr. Watkins and his clean, sawdust-strewn little shop had feverish associations for Marcy. Some months earlier she had inadvertently touched a piece of raw beef liver on his marble counter and had drawn her hand away in surprise. "It's cold."

"Yes, ma'am." Mr. Watkins had been cheerful. "Corpses is always cold."

Corpses! Marcy, her heart in her heels, had run all the way home, and months had passed before she could be persuaded to eat a piece of meat of any kind. Mr. Watkins, who had a fine bass voice, sang in the Methodist choir every Sunday, praising God with the manifest integrity of a good citizen and an honest tradesman, but to Marcy he represented one thing and one alone. Corpses . . . and she had *eaten* them!

She crossed the street now to avoid meeting Mrs. Wilson, Christine's mother, who was given to prying questions about Aunty and Grandma, and turned into the long side street at the end of which, on a graceful rise, stood the pillared old Crittenden house, festooned with creeper and wistaria, solitary in its more than two acres of garden. Marcy sighed with relief, as she always did when she came near home. An obscure comfort and security dwelt for her in the winding drive to the west portico, the herringbone-patterned bricks in the red brick garden walk.

She was happy. She had got Aunty's medicine and the mail, she was home again, she had not had to talk with Mr. Watkins or Mrs. Wilson, everything was all right. It was even Saturday. Maybe Inez would come over after all, and they could play all afternoon.

—4—

THIS, HOWEVER, was not to be. "Dr. Trumbull stopped by," her aunt told her as she unwrapped the medicine and took two of the smooth little white cubes. "He says Diane isn't feeling very well.

He thought it would be nice if you'd come to see her after dinner."

"Diane's silly," Marcy dispassionately observed.

"Well, you'll have to learn to be patient with her silliness." Miss Crittenden hesitated. "I think you're old enough now, Marcy, to be told that Diane is not like other children. She's not quite right. She'll never be as smart as the other girls. Probably she won't get much older in her mind than she is right now. It's not her fault, of course. You must never tease her or show in any way that you think she's different. She might not notice it herself, of course, but it would hurt her mother's feelings. And her grandfather's, too. You wouldn't want to do that. You know Dr. Trumbull has always been mighty good to you, Marcy. He's brought you presents and taken you places with Diane almost all your life."

Marcy, astonished and impressed, quivered with double excitement; Diane was not quite right, and Auntie was telling her about it, talking to her confidentially, as if she were grown up! It was a new experience to Marcy; it made her feel ripe and responsible.

"What makes Diane different?" she asked eagerly. "Why won't she ever be as smart as the other girls, Auntie?" She followed Cynthia across the room, her eyes big with interest.

"I don't know. She was born that way. But I want you to be nice to her; the Trumbulls are old family friends. Besides, I can't afford to offend Dr. Trumbull. Listen! There's Reine scratching at the door. Go let her in."

Marcy went and opened the door, then hurried back, eager to prolong the unaccustomed adult tone of the conversation. "Why can't you, Auntie?"

"Why can't I what?"

"Afford to offend Dr. Trumbull."

"Never mind. Come upstairs now and let me clean you up. Dinner's almost ready."

Marcy, crestfallen at this abrupt dismissal into childhood, followed her aunt's tall figure, with its high crowning pompadour and its long braid of brown hair, up the rear stairs to the south bedroom. "Take off your shoes and stockings too," Cynthia directed. "You'll have to have a bath all over."

She began laying out Marcy's fresh clothing: tucked and embroidered nainsook drawers, starchy flounced petticoats, a crisp blue and white checked gingham jumper dress with a hemstitched dimity guimpe. The underthings, completely handmade, were miracles of expert needlework, and the pleated skirt of the gingham jumper flared to disclose covered inner seams of a precision and finish beyond all expectation in a child's ordinary school frock. Nothing was too much trouble for Cynthia Crittenden where Marcy was concerned.

Now, putting aside the discarded clothing for Pansy to wash, she poured warm water from the rose porcelain pitcher into the matching bowl and tested it with her elbow. "All right, Marcy." She smiled at the chubby naked little girl, who obediently approached and held up her rosy face. "The water's not too hot, is it?"

Marcy, her eyes squeezed tightly shut against the soap, shook her head.

"Here; let's get your hair back up out of the way." Cynthia gathered up Marcy's curls, piled them on top of her head, anchored them with one of the brown tortoiseshell combs from her own pompadour, and further secured them with a blue ribbon bound around the child's head. Her hands upon Marcy's body were gentle, alive, passionately tender; her rare smile appeared again and again as she worked, soaping and sponging the soft little shoulders and the round dimpled elbows and knees. "There! Now you're nice and clean!" she said at last, and caught the child close to her breast for an instant. "Now come sit on the bed and let Auntie dress you."

She had never taught or even allowed Marcy to do anything for

herself. The little girl had never so much as washed her own hands. Cynthia worked the clean white stockings over Marcy's feet; she put on the stubby little black Mary Jane pumps; she adjusted shirt and drawers and petticoat; she scraped meticulously the undersides of the child's fingernails; she brushed, combed, and deftly recurled over her finger the long brown hair that was her especial pride. Marcy stood up, and Cynthia buttoned on first the white guimpe and then the blue gingham dress. Finally she tied an enormous bow of wide stiff blue ribbon at one side of the little girl's head and with a final smoothing of pleats, tucks, and hair pronounced the rite completed.

Marcy made one more attempt to escape the afternoon's engagement. "Couldn't I go over to Diane's tomorrow after Sunday school, instead of today?" she suggested, accepting a slice of buttered bread from her grandmother to prolong her dinner as much as possible.

Cynthia shook her head. "You know very well you have to go to your Grandmother Peake's tomorrow."

"I don't want to," Marcy objected, automatically.

"It makes no difference whether you want to or not," her aunt replied as automatically. "I'm not going to have Mrs. Peake saying I never let you go near her."

"There's nothing there to play with."

"Life isn't all play. Get your playing done this afternoon. There's plenty to play with at Diane's."

This, Marcy knew, was true. Old Dr. Trumbull, his grief for his unfortunate grandchild slashing at his heartstrings, had made her playroom a wonder to behold. Even Marcy, a child far less given to material toys than to the brighter and more volatile figures of her imagination, could not be unimpressed by the wealth of luxury and the prodigality of detail Diane's toys displayed. Diane had thirty-five dolls; every one of these was equipped with a complete wardrobe, including morning, street, and evening gowns, many changes of lace-trimmed underwear, flowered ki-

monos, hats with feathers and fur, silk nightgowns, even tiny kid gloves and rubber overshoes. Diane had heavy leather dolls' trunks piled with gorgeous remnants of satin and velvet and gold and silver lace and brocade for further dressmaking. She had little chests of real silverware, with a tiny monogram on each knife and fork and spoon. Her dolls' house was five feet high and contained—what no other dwelling in the village could boast—a bathroom. She had a Teddy bear as large as herself, with a college professor's cap and gown and spectacles. She had plush and velvet and cotton and wool and wooden replicas of all the animals in the zoo. She had mechanical toys of all kinds, giant beetles made to run along the floor, monkeys seesawing, little carts and trams and derricks, a long train of bright red cars and enough tracks to cover the playroom floor. She had eight complete sets of dishes, ranging from brown crockery to luster and pink willow. She had shelves all along one side of the playroom, on which were to be found (poor Dr. Trumbull!) all the children's books Marcy had ever heard of, and many that were new to her, as well as innumerable game boards and counters far too intricate for Diane's stumbling mind to enjoy. One of these, a game to be played with colored spherical counters like marbles, was Marcy's special joy. Diane was docile; she could easily be kept satisfied for a time with a newly dressed doll or a baby's picture book, and then Marcy would take the bright marbles out of the box and sort them into piles—the red, the blue, the green, the purple and amber and crystal—and dream over them until they turned before her eyes into the miraculous jewels of Aladdin's cave: rubies, sapphires, diamonds, topazes, and emeralds as large as apples and pears. She saw them hanging in clusters, like stalactites, from the overhanging walls of the cave; she saw them piled in breath-taking splendor on the floor, flashing light from every corner. Sometimes it was a full half-hour she spent in this orgy of opulent fancy.

Sooner or later, however, Diane would fling down her doll or her picture book and begin the endless chattering empty ques-

tions that were her only conversation: "Shall I give you a doll? Have you got a doll at home? What's your doll's name? Where is your mamma? What is that on your head?"

To which Marcy, bored but patient, would reply as briefly as possible: "No. Yes. I don't know which one you mean. My mamma's gone to heaven. It's a ribbon, Diane, what do you think—my goodness!"

"Is that your shoe there? Will Santa Claus come tonight? Have you got a bow and arrow? Where is your dog?"

"Home." Marcy answered only the last question of this barrage. "Here, Diane, here's your Teddy bear. Professor Teddy. Don't you want to play with Professor Teddy?"

"P'fessor Teddy," crooned Diane, seizing the huge bear and beginning to cover it with loud, smacking kisses.

Marcy, this afternoon, turned her eyes away. Her aunt's revelation of Diane's lack had made her sorry for Diane and much more patient and gentle in answering her; it had also given her a sense of great importance, in that she knew something about Diane that Diane could never know about herself; but it had not made it any easier to look at Diane or play with her. In the light of her new knowledge Marcy saw the other child's face for what it was; a chill of repulsion assailed her for the first time at sight of the broad, vague, empty smile, the lightless eyes, the dull, flat features; and the sound of Diane kissing the bear made her stomach turn over. She was relieved when Mrs. Trumbull, a quiet, faded woman with brown hair smoothed away from a nearly expressionless face, came to bring cookies and lemonade and to tell Marcy that it was near the hour at which she was expected home.

Dr. Trumbull came, too, just as the little girls were finishing their repast. He took Diane in his arms and kissed her on the forehead, then shook hands kindly with Marcy. "Here; I have something for you." He took a little book from his pocket and handed it to Marcy, while Diane looked on, smiling vacantly. "Can you read that, my dear?"

Marcy nodded, too shy to speak. She wanted to say "Thank you," for she thought the little book very beautiful and desirable. It was bound in padded white kid and had *Abide with Me* stamped in gold on the cover, with a brilliantly illuminated initial in blue and scarlet.

Dr. Trumbull seated himself in the big chair by the window. "Bring it over here," he invited her.

Marcy advanced bashfully to his side. He put his arm about her and took the book from her hands. Marcy was surprised; didn't he think she could read it? But no; that wasn't it. He wanted to read it himself. Why?

*Abide with me; fast falls the eventide.
The darkness deepens . . .*

The old man's voice trembled slightly. Marcy looked up inquiringly.

*Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day.
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories fade away.
Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou Who changest not—*

But Diane had grown impatient. "What is Grandpa doing? Is that your book? Will Santa Claus bring me a book? Do you want to go to Sunday school? When will your mamma come? Is that dress too big? Did you—"

Dr. Trumbull drew a tremulous breath. "Take it, child," he said to Marcy, returning the book. "Diane, dear, come here to Grandpa."

He lifted Diane to his knee; she began playfully slapping him about the temples. He caught her hands gently and held them quiet long enough to say good-by to Marcy. "Come again soon, my dear. You won't—you won't be sorry." His voice sank to a whisper. "Ah, yes, the darkness deepens. The darkness deepens. Good-by."

MARCY SET out for her Sunday visit to her Grandmother Peake in an even more disgruntled frame of mind than usual. Sunday school, although enlivened at first by a change of teachers in Marcy's class, had been disappointing. The new incumbent was a Mrs. Jolly Hunt, wife of a tailor recently established in the little town. She had a toothy, teacherlike smile, bland and professionally cordial, and she wore gold-rimmed pince-nez and had prominent gold fillings in her teeth. She talked unctuously about the dear Lord Jezuz, but her eye upon Marcy was cold. Marcy knew why; Grandma, although her tone and manner were always courteous, had a way of looking at certain people as though they were not there at all, and she had looked that way at Mrs. Jolly Hunt. Marcy had seen her.

"I don't know whether the child ought to be going there or not," Grandma fretted now, in her slight, wispy Southern voice. "But with no Church nearer than Cape Gira'deau—" She sighed. She was still a pretty woman, in a wistful, fawn-eyed way; she had always a little air of asking that her opinions be supported by someone stronger.

"You were the one that would have her go," Miss Cynthia reminded her. "If you want her grounded in mythology, I don't see why the Methodist brand isn't as good as the Episcopalian. Anyhow, Marcy's getting to be a big girl; in a year or two you can send her up to the Cape and get the Methodism confirmed out of her. Jay will be delighted with the expense, no doubt; but you can tell him it will brighten his crown in heaven."

Grandma looked hurt. "Daught, Daught!" she protested, quite at a loss to understand Miss Cynthia's allusion to mythology but entirely certain that the retort had been, as usual, impious. "Don't teach the child to be irreverent."

"Certainly not," Miss Cynthia agreed promptly. "Never be irreverent, Marcy. It has dire consequences. You'll be struck by a thunderbolt, or, at the very least, by a shaft of intelligence. And in this kind of a world—if you're female—there's very little choice between the two."

Grandma's sensitive face quivered. "Marcy, honey, run upstairs and get Grandma her glasses off the washstand." As the child reluctantly left the room, she turned reproachfully on Miss Cynthia. "I don't know why you will hurt me so, Daught; I don't know why you will be so hard. You're like your father. Sometimes he hurt me so I could hardly stand it. And I never knew what he was talking about, either, most of the time." She wiped her pretty brown eyes half furtively, as though she expected the gesture to call forth further sneers. "You're like him, Daught; yes, you are."

"You do me too much honor. What, the Pericles of the Southland, as the wardheelers used to call him? Dear me, no, Ma. I can't aspire to the resemblance. I'm only a woman. I know my place. Pa taught it to me long ago. Surely you've not forgotten how Pa set me down where I belonged? If——"

"Do please hush!" Mrs. Crittenden besought her, catching her breath. "Here comes the child." She took her glasses from Marcy and hurried agitatedly from the room.

Cynthia Crittenden called Marcy to her side. "Your bow's crooked, Marcy; here. And you look as cross as two sticks. I don't wonder, though, after an hour of listening to Mrs.—Hunt, is it? Mrs. Jolly Hunt?—on the human soul. Run on over to your Grandmother Peake's now, or you'll keep her waiting dinner." She laughed suddenly and, as it seemed to Marcy, without reason. "There's a woman that never has any trouble with her soul."

Harriet Peake's soul was in truth the least of her worries. She was a large, white-haired, very handsome woman, as light of heart as she was heavy of tread. Such burdens as she had she bore with surpassing nonchalance, and she was never engaged in anything so absorbing that she had not time to run to her parlor window to watch Tim Madden or old man Garrison going by, and to mutter interestedly to herself, "Now, where are you going, you old goat, and what have you got in that sack?"

She was a notable housekeeper; a clubwoman, so far as the town offered opportunity; exasperatingly a wizard at all card games; an able reviewer of books for the local literary society; an ex-teacher, remembered with mingled affection and horror by any number of adult and thoroughly chastened ex-pupils in the community and faithfully visited by most of them; a pianist of fair ability, and on occasion (among friends) a superlative midwife, before whose prompt resources more than one duly constituted physician had felt himself eclipsed. One of the town's few celebrities, its only Rhodes scholar, was said to have owed his scholarship—and this was logical enough, since he certainly owed his continuing existence—to Mrs. Peake's having doused him punctually, on his appearance at life's threshold with an epidermis definitely and uncompromisingly azure, first into cold water and then into hot, repeating the process until the infuriated infant burst into outraged squalls.

She had borne and reared eight children of her own. All except Marcy's young mother were now alive, adult, capable, and prospering, if the misanthropic Godfrey, who had remained at home to "take care of the old folks," may be said to have prospered. Godfrey was a lawyer and did well enough in his home town, but he had had larger ambitions, and their relinquishment had left him with a swooping and hawklike temper and an acid, frustrated mind. Even Mrs. Peake, whom nobody else on earth could overcrowd, was a little afraid of him. As for Marcy, the very sound of his footstep terrified her.

The elder Mr. Peake, a man of the mild and easygoing type to which the Harriet Peakes of this world are almost invariably yoked, had died within the year. Only Mrs. Peake and Godfrey were left at home. Marcy, no matter how often she approached the tall, many-windowed frame house and set her hand to the knocker, never did so without a qualm of apprehension lest it be Godfrey instead of Grandmother Peake who would open the door. Grandmother Peake herself was quite enough to cope with, for her attitude toward Marcy was critical.

"They've brought that child up so she doesn't know whether she's afoot or ahorseback," Marcy had once heard her complain bitterly. "Last Sunday she wanted a drink of water, and I told her all right, go get one. Didn't she come right straight back and tell me there was none drawn? 'In the name of peace!' I said to her. 'Couldn't you have drawn some, a big girl like you?' She just looked at me."

Godfrey grunted. "Oh, yes, they've got her practically half-witted. The way she scuttles out of my way every time I look at her, you'd think she thought I was going to eat her." He laughed sourly. "What d'you expect, brought up in a houseful of women—crazy women at that? My God A'mighty, even the dog's female!"

Mrs. Peake chuckled with comfortable malice. "You're not calling the high and mighty Crittendens a houseful of crazy women?"

Godfrey snorted.

Mrs. Peake moved impatiently in her chair. "If they'd let me take that child when Agnes died, as I had a perfect right to do—my own daughter's baby!—things would have been different, let me tell you." Her ball of knitting wool rolled off her lap, and she stooped to retrieve it. "Well, I've kept my hands off. I've not said aye, yes, or no about the way they're spoiling her, no matter how I've felt."

"You wouldn't have spoiled her, at any rate," Godfrey commented somewhat dryly.

Mrs. Peake chuckled again. "You're right, I wouldn't! I boxed her mother's ears once before company, after she was sixteen, for answering me impertinently. I don't claim to have been a perfect mother," she continued in a tone whose complacency belied the words, "but all my children knew the meaning of discipline."

"Well, this brat's not impertinent, at least."

"Marcy? She hasn't the spunk to be. Agnes wasn't impertinent, either, as a general thing. But any child, Godfrey, needs to be taken down once in a while. However, it isn't Marcy's behavior that bothers me, though somebody ought to break her of being so shy; it's her helplessness. Nine years old, and can't draw herself a drink of water! I don't know what Cynthia Crittenden can be thinking of."

"That's no normal environment for a child, anyhow." Godfrey had had enough of the subject, and he picked up the Sunday newspaper as a hint. But his mother had not yet said her say.

"It's outrageous, that's what it is—outrageous!" She frowned at her knitting. "If we took it to court, we could probably get her, Godfrey?"

Godfrey did not commit himself. "I don't see why you want her now, just when you've got your own young ones off your hands and can——"

"Sh!" Mrs. Peake held up her knitting needle in warning. "I think she's coming downstairs."

Today Marcy, hesitating on the doorstep after she had let the knocker fall, recalled this conversation with some discomfort. She gave her new Sunday challis an uneasy tweak as her grandmother opened the door.

"Well, there you are!" said Mrs. Peake briskly. "Have you been to Sunday school?"

Marcy nodded.

"Well, come in and have a seat. How do you like your new teacher?"

"Not very much," said Marcy.

"You don't? What's the matter with her?"

Marcy did not reply at once; she was looking, with a sort of hypnotic fascination, at the newspaper behind which Godfrey was concealed. He had not spoken to her; he never did unless it was unavoidable. His chilling silence lay like a weight upon her. She could scarcely follow or comprehend her grandmother's cross-examination, much less formulate acceptable answers to it. Her hands were already cold with discomfort, and unconsciously she pressed her nails into her palms as she strove to maintain her composure.

"Come here a minute," Mrs. Peake said suddenly. "Got a new dress, haven't you?" She caught up a fold of Marcy's dress and examined the underside minutely. "Cynthia Crittenden can sew," she conceded grudgingly. "Look at that, Godfrey. Like fine tailoring."

"Uh-huh," Godfrey replied without lowering his paper.

"Well, dinner's about ready. Wouldn't you like to set the table for me, Marcy?" Mrs. Peake bent upon the little girl a look of determined expectation.

Marcy shook her head. She wanted to say "I don't know how," but after the episode of the drink of water last Sunday she was afraid to. Moreover, to speak at all with Godfrey Peake in the room, sitting there silent behind his paper, was a near impossibility to Marcy. She gulped and said nothing, looking uneasily away from her grandmother. Mrs. Peake adjusted her glasses and glared at her severely, but forbore to turn her suggestion into a command. She rose and left the room, tying on a white apron as she went.

The child sat and waited, her face a mask of misery. She could not make up her mind either to follow her grandmother into the dining room or to stay in the parlor with Godfrey.

A brightly illustrated section of the Sunday paper lay on the carpet near her uncle's chair. He was not reading it; he had apparently finished it, for there were no other sections on the floor. If

she could only have that paper, she too could hide herself until the relief of the summons to dinner; perhaps, if Godfrey still did not look at her, she could even read it and pass the time.

She edged toward the paper by degrees, several times stretching out her hand to take it and drawing it back again. At length, as Godfrey made no sign—for Marcy was fatalistically sure he was aware of every move she made even though his paper shielded her from his sight—she timidly drew it toward her.

“Leave that paper alone!” Godfrey Peake barked, lowering the sheet he held to reveal his sharp-featured, eyeglassed face.

Marcy dropped the supplement as though it had burned her. Her cheeks flamed; tears pricked inside her eyelids, blurring her vision. She had no power of motion to wipe them away. She shrank back in her chair and was silent. Even during the dinner that followed she sat with her eyes downcast, dreading every remark addressed to her by her grandmother, since she would be forced to answer with Godfrey’s eyes upon her. Her heart sank lower and lower; if she could only go home!

—6—

BUT SHE could not go home. The long afternoon at the Peakes’ wore itself gradually away. Marcy’s complaint to her aunt that her Grandmother Peake’s house contained nothing to play with had been scarcely an exaggeration. Harriet Peake, no sentimentalist, made a principle of keeping her premises cleared of all nonessential articles, comprehensively classified by her under the generic term “clutter.” She had encouraged her sons and daughters, as they grew up and moved away, to take with them whatever they wanted of their youthful possessions, and she had summarily disposed of the rest. Of all her large and lusty family no visible trace remained except a high-school pennant of yellow

and black that hung over Godfrey's bed and certain medical paraphernalia left by Godfrey's older brother Marvin, who was a physician. These consisted of an outdated edition of Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary, a small scarificator, and a huge colored chart depicting the successive stages of embryonic human life.

These grisly properties were duly visited by Marcy every time she called upon her grandmother. They had for her a certain inevitable fascination, since the Major, too, had been a doctor and had used such things. The chart, which hung behind the door of an upstairs closet, had of course to be examined in secret. Dorland also was surrounded by hazards, for all Mrs. Peake's bookcases had glass doors, and the sound of a knob illicitly turned might at any moment be overheard by the terrible Godfrey. Sometimes Marcy went no further than to stare at the book's title through the glass, seeing the strange and fearful eyeless, two-headed, or armless monstrosities hidden therein solely by the light of memory.

The scarificator, however, was always available. Marcy picked it up and pushed the tiny lever that released the wicked little blades; what if she should press it against her arm, and . . .

She sighed disconsolately. She never would, she knew. And nothing else could be done with the scarificator, after all.

"I wish I could go home—I wish I could go home—I wish I could go home," she murmured in a singsong whisper. She thought longingly of all the "things" at home that furnished forth the vaulted palaces of her imagination: the carved ivory and ebony chessmen, the fluted seashells of pink and brown and mottled yellow, the big box of jet ornaments, buckles and beads and bows and butterflies and long clicking crystal-cut necklaces, that could be pulled out from under Grandma's bed and played with at any time; the Japanese and Philippine curios Mamma and Papa had brought back after the Spanish-American War; the box Auntie would sometimes show her, when she was "in a good humor," containing a blue and white and silver valentine so

large and so exquisitely scrolled, so studded with blossoms and little silver doves, and so frosted here and there with seven-pointed silver stars that Marcy could hardly believe it was real.

"How old were you when somebody sent you that, Auntie?" she would ask, though she had been told many times before.

"Eighteen," Miss Cynthia would answer, as always.

"Was it somebody in love with you?"

Cynthia Crittenden would close the box. "I suppose he thought he was, Marcy."

"Then why didn't you marry him?"

"Don't ask so many questions." Miss Cynthia would rise and put the box away.

"When will you show it to me again, Auntie?"

"Don't you ever get tired of seeing it?"

Marcy shook her head emphatically; get tired of seeing such a valentine as that? Now, sitting on the upper landing of the Peake staircase with the scarificator lying idle in her lap, thinking of Auntie's valentine, she grew so lonely for Auntie that it seemed she could not bear it. She thought of Auntie reading to her in the big bed they shared, as she did almost every night; she saw the lamp-light smooth on Auntie's brown hair and Auntie's tense face calm, relaxed, enjoying. Reading to herself, Cynthia Crittenden gave no sign of pleasure at any time; reading to Marcy, she read with actual rapture. Sometimes, after a just allowance of the White Knight or Sindbad or the Swiss Family Robinson, she would try the little girl with something more mature:

*O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,
Yellow and black and pale and hectic red . . .*

At this point she might drop the book in her lap and look over at Marcy with kindled eyes. "Do you see, Marcy? Do you see how

the vowel sounds—the *a*'s and *e*'s and *i*'s and—but no, of course you don't. What am I talking about?"

"Yes, I do. I do, too, Auntie." She did not, of course, entirely; but it was unthinkable that Auntie should stop reading. "I do, too, Auntie."

"Well——" And Cynthia would read on.

Thinking thus of Auntie as she moped on the top landing in the Peake house in the middle of the dreary Sunday afternoon, Marcy became vaguely aware that Grandmother Peake and Godfrey were again discussing Auntie downstairs; or, at least, that they were discussing the Crittendens in general, for the word "Jay" emerged clearly.

"Jay supports them, of course, when he's at home and sober. What they do the rest of the time I'm sure I couldn't tell you." Mrs. Peake shifted her rocking chair with a rasping sound. "But let us keep up appearances or die! If the Major had stuck to his practice and let politics alone they'd have had enough to live on, at least. He had plenty to begin with, even after the war. As it is, it wouldn't surprise me much if they'd gone hungry more than once."

Godfrey had heard the entire Crittenden saga at least a hundred times—it seemed to have endless fascination for his mother—but he was in an indulgent humor. "Marcy doesn't look very hungry," he observed with a short laugh.

"Oh, well, I daresay Cynthia would steal for Marcy if she had to. She's got no business with the child, but I suppose she loves her right enough."

Godfrey was still indulgent. "Pity she never married."

Mrs. Peake chuckled, as usual. "The Major put a spoke in that wheel."

"Clifton Brown, wasn't it?"

"Yes. He drank some—too much to marry a Crittenden! A case of the pot calling the kettle black if I ever saw one. They'd better

have looked at home. Jay's little better than a common drunkard, and the Major himself was half-seas over a good part of the time."

"Locked her up, didn't he?"

"Did he not, the old devil! He locked her up in his office—he had his office at home then—where he could keep an eye on her in the daytime, and escorted her to her bedroom every night and locked her in there. Clifton finally gave up and went and bought a newspaper somewhere in Ohio, and that was the end of that."

Mrs. Peake mused for a space. "It wasn't just his locking her up, Godfrey—it couldn't have been. That wouldn't have stopped Cynthia. He must have had some other hold over her; he was an unscrupulous old wretch. He wouldn't have stopped at anything to carry his point, and Cynthia was too much like him to be bullied into minding him. I don't suppose anybody will ever know what he did to her. But do you know, Godfrey"—she lowered her voice—"I've always thought that must have been when the other thing began. When he locked her into his office, you know."

"Might have been," Godfrey pondered. "Too bad."

"It *was* too bad. Cynthia had brains—she'd been at odds with the Major long before that, of course, when she wasn't more than sixteen. She wanted to go to college, no less." Mrs. Peake laughed shortly.

"The old boy wouldn't let her?"

"Clay Crittenden let a girl go to college? If you'll just consider the kind of a woman he married, you'll never ask. He didn't believe in advanced females."

"I've always thought Mrs. Crittenden was a nice enough woman."

"I don't say she isn't. But she hasn't got any brains and never did have, and the Major was proud of it. He said to me one time, 'They don't raise girls like Jeanie any more; I could span her waist with my hands when she was eighteen.' I felt like telling him he could have spanned her brain with less than that, but it

would only have pleased him. Why, Godfrey"—Mrs. Peake lowered her voice again—"you've only got to look at the family she raised! Look at Cynthia. Look at Marcy's father, a suicide at thirty. Look at Jay drinking himself to death. I make no claim to having been a perfect mother," she continued virtuously, "but none of mine, you'll notice, ended up that way!"

"Funny how a family will go to pieces like that sometimes," mused Godfrey. "Good stock to begin with, everything favorable, and then——"

Mrs. Peake sniffed. "Good stock or no good stock—and I don't know that the Crittenden stock was ever so all-fired good as some people have made it out to be, at that—Clay Crittenden was no paragon, believe me! I was there one time giving Cynthia a music lesson, and I heard him swearing at Mrs. Crittenden in the other room, and her crying. 'You'll kill me, Clay,' I heard her say to him, 'you'll just kill me!' And he said to her, 'Well, go on and die, damn you—who cares?' Just like that."

"Oh, well, he was probably drunk." Godfrey rose and stretched himself, yawning loudly.

"*In vino veritas*," retorted Mrs. Peake neatly. "There! I've been trying to work that quotation in for thirty years!" she exclaimed with a sudden winning lapse into childlike candor. "Where's Marcy got to? Marcy!" she called.

Marcy put the scarificator away and came slowly down the stairs. She had neither heard nor comprehended the whole of the conversation, but she had heard—and was profoundly impressed by—Mrs. Peake's story of the Major's swearing at Grandma. She returned but absent replies to the perfunctory conversational advances with which Mrs. Peake now plied her.

Godfrey had put on his hat and gone out. The hall clock ticked loudly in the silence.

"Well!" Mrs. Peake, patting a yawn of her own, finally glanced toward the swinging pendulum. "Won't your Auntie be looking for you pretty soon?"

"HELL'S BIG bells on a mountain, Marcy," said Grandpa, hooking one elbow over a low branch of the paradise tree on which Marcy's rope swing was hung, "a man's got to tear loose once in a while, if he is a man."

Marcy nodded reasonably enough. It was almost a week since she had overheard those disjointed fragments of talk in the Peake parlor which were eventually to reveal to her, like successive pieces of a difficult jigsaw puzzle, the secrets that attended her life at home. Thus far only one of them had been registered clearly on her consciousness. Hearing that Grandpa had once actually said to Grandma, "Well, go on and die, damn you! Who cares?" she had been smitten with a horror in which there was a shocking element of delight. She had even felt a certain amount of pride, as though unkindness on so monumental a scale must, like any other prodigious achievement, command respect. At the same time, she had an uncomfortable impression that if anybody but Grandpa had said such a thing to her gentle grandmother it would have been a different matter altogether. In a fleet and flashing moment of revelation she saw that even Aunty, who had hated Grandpa, must have rejoiced in him, too. The indestructible power of personality was thus brought to bear upon the child's mind. Naturally, the impression did not remain on the level of consciousness; yet Marcy, having in a manner of speaking summoned the Major forth to judgment, found in it sufficient justification for accepting at their face value any excuses

he cared to make. More, she felt justified in making excuses for him and did so forthwith, automatically putting them into his own idiom as she had heard it quoted all her life.

"Jeanie knew I didn't mean any harm," the Major's shade continued blandly. "Ah, what a woman, Marcy—what a woman! I could span her waist with my two hands, when she was eighteen. They don't raise 'em like that any more. They're all Hattie Peakes nowadays."

Marcy, swinging idly back and forth, propelled by one stub-toed slipper, tried vainly to visualize Harriet Peake as a girl of eighteen. Do what she might, the picture remained that of a portly and authoritative matron given to brisk instruction and abrupt inquiry, though perhaps with thick hair in a round comb, and no glasses. Nothing was easier, on the other hand, than to imagine Jeanie Crittenden in her girlhood, her dark curls clustered and her brown eyes wide and glowing above a frilled and fluted dancing dress of hooped tarletan as wide and pink as a midsummer rose. Yes, Grandma had been a girl; a flower in her hair, a long white glove cast aside, a scented fan dropped casually in a wide-silled, moon-flooded window, all belonged recognizably to Grandma.

Cynthia Crittenden came around the house from the back garden, which she had crossed on her way from the chicken run far to the rear. Seeing Marcy in the swing, she called: "Be careful and don't get your dress soiled, Marcy. You'll have to go over to Uncle Jay's with the grocery order after a while."

Marcy's face fell. This was a frequent assignment but always an unwelcome one, especially on Saturday. "Can't I go now?" she called back. "Inez said maybe she'd come over after dinner."

"Very well," assented Miss Crittenden. "Come get the note. It's ready."

Marcy followed her into the house and waited while her aunt folded the note and gave it to her, straightening her hair ribbon as she talked. "Give it to Jay himself, remember, not to Lora. Tell

him to tell Martin those last Irish potatoes were miserable, not fit to eat. And ask Jay if he'll have Pickett send a surrey tomorrow to take Ma out to the cemetery."

Marcy pricked up her ears. "Can I go, too?"

"To the cemetery, you mean? What on earth do you want to go to the cemetery for?"

"I just want to."

"Well—" Miss Cynthia considered. "You've been over to see Mrs. Peake every Sunday for quite a while; it won't matter if you miss tomorrow. I suppose you can go with Ma if you want to."

Marcy put the note into her pocket and set forth on her disagreeable errand. She did not like Uncle Jay's wife, who was given to asking "Cat got your tongue?" and to making sidelong remarks about certain little girls who had been raised to consider themselves too good to converse with ordinary folks, even when those same folks had to "do" for them. She made these remarks in a tone meant to be facetious, but Marcy knew well enough that there was more in Aunt Lora's gibes than the jest that flicked the surface.

Uncle Jay himself, a bald, mustached, silent fat man, was a good deal of a stranger to Marcy. He spoke so infrequently that it was impossible for her really to know him. Custom had relaxed to some extent the shyness with which she approached him, but she still found it difficult to do more than hand him the grocery order and go. Today she was charged with additional messages, and she dreaded them beyond all power of expression.

Jay Crittenden received her communications, as usual, in a considering silence. He had no trace of the infantile look worn by so many fat and bald-headed men; his dark eyes, above and below heavy folds of fatty tissue, revealed the shrewdness of the professional politician, and his countenance was keen and observant. He read the note, nodded, and told Marcy that the surrey would come for his mother at about two o'clock the next day. As she was turning to go he suddenly added, with an odd trick he

had of omitting nearly every other word, "Oh—Marcy. Tell 'em try make these groceries last Wednesday 't least. Things pretty tight right now."

Marcy nodded, flushing scarlet and casting down her eyes as she felt Lora Crittenden's mocking gaze upon her. Uncle Jay fished about in his pockets and drew forth three crumpled one-dollar bills, which he thrust into Marcy's hand. "May need little cash," he mumbled apologetically, and made an abortive attempt to cover Aunt Lora's punctual sniff by repeating: "Have surrey there Ma 'bout two tomorrow, tell her."

Had Marcy but known it, he was quite as uncomfortable as she was. By nature Jay Crittenden was a kind man and a lavish provider. Under the watching eyes of his wife he could give no free expression to his generous impulses, but Marcy knew quite well that when the grocery order arrived it would be larger than Auntie's list and embellished with some luxury or delicacy as well—a box of bonbons, a flask of fine brandy for Mrs. Crittenden's delicious mincemeat, a jar of figs preserved in thick amber sirup, or a couple of melons a little in advance of the season. The natural and wholly unconscious grace within him invariably strove thus to purify his offerings of any taint of "charity" and to make his peace with his mother and sister for their humiliating need of his help. One of Marcy's earliest memories of Christmas was the memory of Uncle Jay coming in laden with gifts and sweets, a wiry darky behind him staggering under the weight of a giant turkey and a vast hamper of fruits and cheese and wine. Then he was jovial and hearty; then he smiled as he was never known to smile at any other time; he was his open self, comfortable, comforting, at ease, enabled at last to give without being grudged the acceptance. Thinking of Uncle Jay at Christmas preserved for Marcy what feeling she had of affection for the silent man and trust in his friendship. Yet year after year went by and she knew him no better.

The old brown setter Reine ambled out to meet her as she

arrived at home, and, much to her surprise, was followed by Cynthia Crittenden. Marcy's eyes widened; Aunty was not much in the habit of spending time outdoors.

"It's such a nice spring day," Cynthia explained. "Did you find Jay at home?"

Marcy nodded. "He said he'd have the things sent out right away, and the surrey will be here for Grandma at two tomorrow." Marcy gulped. "He sent this." She gave her aunt the three dollars, noting with some anxiety the change of expression that accompanied the acceptance. She cleared her throat; there was a mist of dread before her eyes. "Aunty. He said——" She faltered.

"Well?" Miss Cynthia prompted her. "What did he say?"

"He said could you make the groceries last till Wednesday at least because things are pretty tight just now." Marcy poured the sentence out like one word, her beseeching gaze on her aunt's face.

Cynthia Crittenden turned without a word and went into the house, leading Reine by the collar. Marcy stood still for a moment, looking unhappily after her; then she trudged disconsolately back to the swing. Once she heard Cynthia's voice cry out bitterly: ". . . not enough for Pa to ruin my life, and yours; no, he must leave us paupers, to eat what Jay has left over from feeding Lora Jackson!" She heard the sound, but not the words, of Mrs. Crittenden's fluttering protest; then there was silence. A few moments later she saw her aunt and the old dog come out of the house by the rear door and disappear down the lilac-bordered path to the storeroom.

Marcy's heart sank. If Aunty had found the house unbearable, as she did every once in a while, there would be no comfort anywhere for Marcy until her return. In a sort of despairing blankness the child continued to sit and wait, only occasionally remembering to swing a little; but neither the woman nor the dog emerged. It was perhaps an hour later when old Mrs. Crittenden, putting on the white lawn sunbonnet she never failed to wear in the garden even in early spring, came out and spoke to her.

"Your Auntie feels bad, Marcy. Go out and see her. Go out and love her a little. She's in the storeroom, I reckon. If anybody can make her feel better, you can. Talk pretty to her." She gave Marcy a gentle push between the shoulders. "You go on, honey-pie," she urged.

Marcy went with doubtful steps down the path to the storeroom and timidly opened the door. It was so dark within that at first she could see nothing but the vague outlines of boxes and barrels and discarded household furniture. Then she saw Auntie sitting motionless on a wooden tub in the corner, her long braid over one shoulder, her chin in one white-knuckled hand, and Reine beside her nuzzling and whining. Cynthia Crittenden's face was paper-pale; anger flamed into her eyes at the turning of the doorknob but disappeared when she saw that it was Marcy.

"Come in if you want to, honey," she said.

Marcy edged her way in and stood silent, uncertain what to do. She had known in advance that she could not "talk pretty" to Auntie or "love" her; these demonstrations were impossible to Marcy unless Auntie initiated them. But she gazed at Cynthia with such piteous entreaty that the woman smiled wanly and made a place for her to sit on the tub by her side.

"Never mind, honey," she said. "I'm not mad at you. You and poor old Reine here are all I've got to live for." She stroked the dog's silky head as she spoke, and Reine pressed nearer her knee, whining anxiously.

"You've got Grandma," Marcy ventured to remind her. "And Uncle Jay."

Cynthia Crittenden smiled acidly. "Yes; I've got Grandma and Uncle Jay. Much good it'll do me."

"Don't you like people, Auntie?"

"I love them." Cynthia laughed oddly and grimly. "I'm like Mark Twain; I love the whole human race, but I wish I had it back in the Ark—with an auger."

Marcy had brightened momentarily at mention of Mark

Twain, but now she looked dejected again; not knowing the meaning of the word "auger," she did not follow her aunt's quotation. But her whole body ached with the weight of her love for Aunt. "If anybody can make her feel better, you can," Grandma had said. She would try once more. "Aunt," she began, "did you ever see anybody that was perfectly beautiful? You know, like a princess in a fairy tale."

"No. Why? Did you?"

Marcy nodded shyly. "You are," she whispered with an effort, her faithful eyes adoring in the gloom.

Cynthia Crittenden stared down at her. To the child's terror, her face seemed about to break in pieces and fall shattered to the floor. "O my God," she breathed, stammering. "O my God in heaven——"

Reine uttered an agonized yelp. The desolate woman put her head down on the dog's quivering back and burst into tears.

—8—

TO MARCY, who had never before seen a grown person weep, her aunt's discomposure seemed cataclysmic, much as though the omnipotent God she called on had flung away His royal scepter and hidden His face on the arm of His throne. It was the child's first intimation that the adult can be confounded by a chance word, by an indeterminable emotion stricken and left without help or hope.

Not that Marcy herself made this generalization. She could not have imagined the other women she knew—Mrs. Wilson, busy about the affairs of her neighbors, or Mrs. Colton, whom for some odd reason Marcy always visualized as perpetually making blackberry jelly—breaking down to weep, and she accepted

Cynthia's dismay as a part of the difference that separated the Crittendens from the rest of the town and herself from the community of her schoolmates.

This difference had mixed meanings for the little girl. Her strong inner sense of drama approved it, but her isolation bred occasional misgivings. Would not the other children have liked her better, would she not have been much happier, if Mamma and Papa had not died? Somewhere within Marcy there was a wide streak of conventionality; no mother could have taken better care of her than Auntie did, and this she knew. Yet she frequently let herself dream, in the last few moments before she fell asleep at night, of the good-night kisses and brooding eyes and encircling arms of her own mother. She had seizures of agonized self-pity—highly derivative, to be sure, and easily traceable to their several sources by anyone familiar with the books on the Crittenden shelves—in which she wandered out into the garden and stood for a long time beside whatever flower chanced to be in bloom, repeatedly murmuring "*Dear Mamma!*" and trying to force a respectable amount of humidity into her eyes.

In this she was seldom successful. The conventional element in her character was balanced by a vein of skepticism, which caused her always to take with a good deal of salt the dolorous pronouncements of others on her misfortune in being an orphan and confided to the care of Cynthia Crittenden. She knew well enough that her Grandmother Peake, among others, thought Cynthia's guardianship unwise if not disastrous, but even at the age of nine Marcy was sure that she, Marcy, knew a great deal more about Auntie than Grandmother Peake did. As for her orphanhood, although she could see that there might be advantages in having a mamma of one's own, she was far from being convinced that it was equally advantageous to have a papa. Most of the papas of her acquaintance seemed to her great nuisances, shouting and stamping and laying down the law. Her own papa, certainly, in spite of

shoulder bars and brass buttons and imposing 1898 mustache, looked kindly and pleasant enough in all his photographs; but Marcy did not trust the breed.

The sobering effect of Cynthia's distress remained with her all that day, although by the time Inez Colton arrived to spend the afternoon Miss Crittenden had so far recovered herself as to make lemonade for the two little girls and help them serve it on a small white-covered table under one of the silver poplars.

Inez, as usual, was fidgety. "I can't hang round here all day 'nelse we do somethin'," she fretted when Miss Cynthia had gone into the house. "What we goin' to do?"

"I don't care. What do you want to?"

"You got 'ny new paper dolls?"

Marcy nodded. "Auntie gave me a whole new catalogue. We can cut some out."

She spoke without any particular enthusiasm. She did not care much for paper dolls, or indeed for dolls of any kind, though she would have felt seriously deprived and would probably have wept heartbrokenly if none had been forthcoming on any morning when gifts might logically be expected. Marcy believed in dolls as a necessary portion of the glitter and enchantment of Christmas, but she played conventionally with them only to pacify Diane Trumbull or to meet the somewhat stringent directive requirements of the autocratic Inez, whom she worshiped with an unaccounting and unaccountable devotion. Alone, she made use of her dolls as mere lay figures upon which to drape the brilliant and ever-changing fabrics of her fancy, and a casual observer would not have known that she was playing with them at all, for she seldom took them up in her hands. She could dream at them quite as well while they lay on their shelves or in their wicker cradles.

She brought forth the huge mail-order catalogue for Inez, who seized it in the manner of one snatching property away from sabotage and indignantly turned its pages, frowning with dis-

approval. "There aren't hardly any colored ones," she complained.

"Wait. There. There's a colored page," Marcy pointed out.

"Those are all children. Hasn't it got any colored ladies?"

Marcy giggled, her dimple stealing forth; the question made her think of Pansy. But the giggle was a mistake; the difficult Inez set her arms akimbo. "Well, what you laughin' at now?"

Marcy coughed apologetically. "I just thought it was funny you said 'colored ladies' because I thought maybe you wanted some colored ladies to come and do the washing, like Pansy. For the other paper dolls, you know."

Inez was scornful. "Haven't you got any sense? You can't wash paper doll clothes. They're made out of paper."

Marcy tried to explain, but Inez' mood had changed; she tossed the catalogue pettishly aside. "I don't want to play paper dolls," she fumed. "What else can we do?"

Marcy cast hurriedly about in her mind. She must think of something at once, or Inez would go home. "Make streetcars?" she suggested doubtfully.

"Pooh!" Inez had no words for her disgust. "You can't make a streetcar. You're not even a carpenter."

"Little ones, I mean," pleaded Marcy. "Out of shoeboxes. Aunty showed me. You cut windows out of the sides and a hole in the lid and then you paste red tissue paper over all the side holes and tie a string to one end of the box and put a candle inside and light it, and when it gets dark you pull it along by the string and the light shines through. It's fun."

Inez was momentarily attracted but mentioned an insuperable objection. "It's not dark. It's as light as anything."

"I meant we could make some now and wait till it gets dark and——"

But Inez was not constructed for waiting. "I want to do somethin' now!" she shrilled. "I'm not comin' over to your house any more; it's no fun." Suddenly her manner changed. "Listen here,

Marcy," she said, her voice taking on a wheedling note, "I know somethin' we can do. I will if you will."

"What?" In her relief, Marcy would have done anything.

Inez sank her voice to a whisper. "Let's go down by the jail-house and see if we c'n see Lottie Hahnemann in there."

Marcy was aghast. "Is Lottie Hahnemann in jail? What'd she do?"

Inez glanced warily toward the house to make sure that neither Mrs. Crittenden nor Miss Cynthia was within earshot. "She had a baby," she whispered.

This announcement was startling enough to set aside even Marcy's dread of Inez' inflammable temper. "Lottie Hahnemann couldn't have a baby. She's not even grown up or married or anything. She still goes to school."

"Well, don't you s'pose I know that, smarty? I guess I know as much about Lottie Hahnemann as you do. She did, too, have a baby. I heard my own mamma tell my own papa she did."

Marcy felt her position shaken. "I thought you couldn't have a baby till you got married."

"You can't 'nelse you're low-down like Lottie. Mamma says nobody in this town'll ever speak to her again. She thinks it's awful." Inez' expression was an odd mixture of embarrassment and triumph; she avoided looking directly at Marcy, and her tense little face, with its transparent blonde skin, had reddened to the hair line. "You know where babies come from?" she demanded.

Marcy nodded uncomfortably. "My Uncle Marvin has a picture of babies before they come."

For once Inez was impressed. "A picture! What do they look like?"

"I don't know. Sort of funny." Marcy, too, was pink with embarrassment; she scraped her toe nervously on the ground.

Inez lowered her voice still further. "Do you know what makes 'em come?"

Marcy shook her head. Inez bent forward and whispered in her ear at some length. Marcy went from pink to scarlet. "I don't b'lieve it."

"Well, they do." Inez, having made her sensation, was surprisingly mild. "And Lottie Hahnemann did when she wasn't even married."

Marcy was silent for some time. "Did they put her in jail?" she asked at length.

"I guess so. It's against the law, 'nelse you're married."

"What will they do to the baby?" The thought of the baby filled Marcy with horrified fascination. She pictured it monstrous, three-eyed or peak-headed or armless like the terrifying pictures in Dorland, and probably slimy to the touch; such a baby could not be like other babies. "Will they kill it, Inez?"

Inez, although she had obviously never thought of this possibility, was entirely willing to dramatize the suggestion. "Prob'ly," she said airily. "Or maybe just throw it in the jailhouse and make it eat out of a tin pan."

A vision of the repulsive baby sliding and wallowing toward food set down in a tin pan on the stone floor of the "jailhouse" assailed the too-imaginative Marcy. Involuntarily she put her hand to her stomach; "I think I have to throw up," she said. But the impulse passed. "Does Lottie have to eat out of tin pans too, do you reckon?"

"'Course she does, if she's in jail." Inez was quite herself again; the discomfiture occasioned by her instruction of Marcy had given place to pleasurable excitement. "Let's go see if she's in there. Come on, Marcy. I will if you will."

Marcy hesitated. She doubted whether Aunty's permission could be obtained for an expedition of this kind. Inez, seeing her indecision, tugged imperatively at her sleeve. "They wouldn't let you if you asked 'em. Come on. Let's just go."

With elaborate stealthiness she led Marcy out of the Crittenden garden through the crumbling break in the wall. The two

little girls hurried away in the direction of the county jail. "I know somebody else that's in there," the well-informed Inez continued. "Old Tom Tolliver. He went around sellin' skinned cats and callin' 'em squirrels. People et 'em. He sold Pattersons their own old cat and Mrs. Patterson made it into a stew. The old rip's always doin' somethin' like that, my papa says." Inez again lowered her voice to impress Marcy with the fearfulness of the coming revelation: "Where d'you s'pose papa says he lives when he's not in jail? In the haunted house out by the graveyard. I'm goin' up there someday when he gets out and see if he does."

Inez' researches into community life were conducted on too comprehensive a scale for Marcy, who could not rise to much interest in old Tom Tolliver just now, or even in the perturbation of a citizenry unwittingly set down to dine upon its own household pets. Lottie Hahnemann and her unmentionable baby occupied all the attention she had to spare. "There's the jail-house," she breathed as they turned the corner.

The two children looked up at the iron-barred windows. All were blank but one, and in this one the bushy gray hair and the melancholy but resigned countenance of old Tom Tolliver were intermittently framed. "You younguns better git along home," he called, seeing their upturned eyes upon him. "This ain't no place fer little girls. You ain't got no business to hang around here."

"Will if I want to," Inez retorted with automatic dudgeon. "Say! Mr. Tolliver! Is Lottie Hahnemann in there?"

"No, she ain't. You git on home."

Inez put out her tongue, but Marcy was quite ready to "git on home." She was forbidden to leave the Crittenden yard without express permission, and she seldom disobeyed Aunty in any respect. Moreover, now that there seemed to be no chance of getting a sight of the erring Lottie Hahnemann, Marcy was relieved; Inez might have made her look at the ghastly baby itself! "Come on, Inez. Let's do go home," she said.

Inez assented reluctantly. "Well, all right."

A blankness fell upon the two little girls. Marcy, in the reaction, felt almost sleepy. "I'm going out to the graveyard tomorrow with Grandma. In Pickett's surrey," she announced after a long silence.

"I don't care." They had reached the gap in the Crittenden wall. "Well, I haf to go home now. G'by." Inez turned dispiritedly away. "I had a nice time."

"G'by. Come over again some time." This was routine. Both children would have repeated these polite leavetakings even through floods of infuriated tears.

Marcy slipped through the gap in the wall and sat down in her swing. Apparently she had not been missed. Reine, who had been sleeping in the sun, rose and stretched herself, yawning widely, and Marcy, seeing her, yawned too. The exciting day, Lottie and her baby, the code of social ethics, the majesty of the law, and the stupendous Fact imparted by Inez were all alike unnoticeable, matter of course, no longer to be exclaimed over or wondered at. Life was deliberately but unmistakably clearing its way toward Marcy, its great stride making nothing of the Crittenden garden wall.

Pansy had been commissioned in advance to help with the cemetery planting, and she was waiting, basket and trowel in hand, outside the high iron grille when the surrey drove up to the entrance. Mrs. Crittenden clicked her tongue in annoyance. "Why, Pansy, I thought you'd be in there and have the biggest part of the digging over with before I got here." She took her own basket from Pickett's boy, saw him help Marcy safely down, and gave him his return directions.

Pansy's billowing bulk moved uneasily under her new purple calico dress, but she shook her head with emphasis. "No, ma'am, Mis' Crittenden, you got to excuse me. I ain' goin' no grabeyahd 'lessen somebody goin' wif me, no, ma'am. No time. Neber." She

shifted her "toothbresh," a well-chewed lilac twig heavily laden with dark brown snuff, to the opposite corner of her wide stained mouth, and smiled at Marcy. "Howdy, Miss Marcy," she added.

"Howdy, Pansy," Marcy replied before she remembered that her chameleonlike tendency to adapt her speech to her company was a matter of disapproval when the company chanced to be Pansy. "I mean how are you," she hastily corrected herself.

But Mrs. Crittenden had not noticed the slip. "Don't be so foolish, Pansy!" she said severely. "It's broad daylight."

Pansy was stubborn. She shook her head again. "Daylight er no daylight, ma'am, dem grabes gib me willies. Ole hanted house ober yander gib me willies too. I ain' projeckin' aroun' none wif no daid folks. Dey leab me erlone, I leab dem erlone. Ole raw haid en bloody bones ain' goin' git Pansy. No, ma'am."

Marcy stared at her. Pansy's conversation was always colorful, but here was a hint of something really superb. "Raw head and bloody bones," Marcy said over and over in her mind, shuddering voluptuously. "Raw head and bloody bones." She could not have explained why the gruesome phrase did not evoke the same retching sickness that had resulted from a too-vivid impression of Lottie Hahnemann's baby, but it certainly did not; this emotion was thrillingly pleasant. By and by, when Grandma was too busy to notice, she would hear more of it. "Let's hurry up, Grandma," she urged, tugging at Mrs. Crittenden's hand.

Mrs. Crittenden gave her basket to Pansy, and the three entered the cemetery and moved toward the Crittenden plot, easily discernible at a distance because of the Major's monument. This was an imposing marble shaft some eight feet tall, surmounted by the figure of a Confederate officer. It was the only stone in the Crittenden enclosure. The other graves, those of Marcy's parents and an elder sister who had died in infancy, were unmarked except for plantings of bridal wreath whose long graceful sprays were now well laden with bloom. Other flowers, daffodils and violets and shooting stars and lilies of the valley, were

also coming into blossom. Here and there a bee labored in the sunshine, his gauze wings glistening as he pushed his way into a swinging flower.

Pansy set the baskets on the new green grass at the edge of the plot and wagged her head admiringly at the carved laurel leaves encircling the Major's pedestal. "Major, he suttinly gotten him a fine statue," she remarked. "Yes, ma'am! Mus' be bigges' one in grabeyahd, I reckon."

Marcy shot a glance of involuntary apprehension at her grandmother, recalling Cynthia Crittenden's acrid comments on the memorial inequality in the Crittenden burial ground. "Pa always was miscast in the drama of life," Cynthia was wont to observe grimly, "and in death he has been true to his natural instincts, which were those of a tomcat that keeps up his own strength and importance by eating his young." And when Mrs. Crittenden winced under this goad she would affect surprise: "But what else do you call it, Ma? He certainly swallowed the three of us whole, Jay and Mark and me, almost as soon as we got our eyes open and were old enough to squirm. Mark's gone; and what's left of Jay or me, either one, to live out our lives with? Or of you, for that matter?"

"I don't know what you mean, Daught," Mrs. Crittenden would say with a pitiful attempt at dignity. "If you're talking about the tombstone again"—her pretty chin would quiver—"you know very well that Agnes and Mark and the baby would have had nice stones too if there'd been any money for them."

"But how could there be any, with Pa adequately taken care of?" Cynthia would retort. "That's exactly what I've been saying. Pa planned and designed that tombstone himself, remember. He might at least have left a space for your name, Ma; but you notice he didn't. He never had any real respect for you, anyway. But then," she might add bitterly, in unconscious quotation of Harriet Peake, "there was no need for him to do that; he could span your waist with his hands."

These cruelties Marcy was entirely able to recognize for what they were, and, although she was incapable of resentment toward either Aunt or Grandpa, it distressed her to see Grandma suffer. She was relieved now to find that Pansy's comment on the stone had quite a different effect. "Yes, it is a big stone," Mrs. Crittenden replied, with gentle satisfaction. "The Major was a big man, Pansy."

"Yes, ma'am," Pansy agreed respectfully. "Yes, ma'am, I reckon he was; I reckon he was. Pete say," she continued, jerking her head in a homeward direction to indicate her husband, "Pete say Major he outcuss any five men he eber seen. Pete say Major suttinly was Lord's wonder when it come to cussin'." She chuckled admiringly.

Mrs. Crittenden made no disavowal of this criterion of greatness. On the contrary, she seemed quietly pleased. "The Major did have a hot temper," she admitted, "but most gentlemen have hot tempers. He was a smart doctor and a brave officer." The wind blew her thin black veil away from her delicate features, clear as a white cameo; her reminiscent eyes were well content. Out of range of Cynthia's taunts, she had a child's pride in her husband's monument; smiling, she laid her little hand for a moment on the smooth marble. "A smart doctor and a brave officer," she repeated.

"Yes, ma'am," Pansy agreed again. "Suttinly was." She picked up a clump of cuttings. "Did you want dishyere bunch white vi'lets on Miss Agnes' baby?" She indicated the little grave between the two longer unmarked ones.

"Yes. Give them to me. You start digging over there along the other side of Captain Mark's grave. Marcy, honey, get Grandma her trowel. It's wrapped up in a newspaper on top of the basket."

The two women worked in silence for some time. Marcy, wandering at will among the graves through still sunlight and dancing shadow, read the old epitaphs and the deep-graven family names. Some were familiar; there was the Trumbull plot, in which Diane's father lay buried, and over here were the four small stones

that marked the sorrowful end of little Mrs. Furness' hopes for a living family. Near the iron fence at the back were the "poor graves," so called for the scantiness of their fenced-in lots and for the substitute markers and makeshift decorations that covered them. Among the latter, even common bottles were not infrequent; there were jugs and broken pottery and a wilderness of small china figures. One grave was adorned with three yellow glass butter dishes in the semblance of nesting hens, and another supported a large brown crockery churn and several shards of blue and flowered earthenware. Several were entirely encircled by cheap little images from which the rain and the wind and the snow had long since scoured away the paint, leaving them chalk white against the ground: dogs, kittens, shepherdesses, lambs, horses, urns, baskets of flowers and bowls of fruit, and in one instance the expressionless head of a china doll. Marcy, recalling a little ornament at home representing a pink china pig playing on a green china piano, imagined how it would look, how bright and new and vivid, among the washed-out little figures on the poor graves.

She glanced over her shoulder and, seeing Mrs. Crittenden and Pansy still working over the transplanted slips, made her way to the far corner of the cemetery, toward a spot that had always drawn her imagination like a magnet. The Suicide's Grave it was called, not because it was by any means the only such grave in the place, but because it was the only one so marked. It was one of the oldest graves in the cemetery, bearing a date of the eighteenth century, and its crumbling stone was carved with an almost unrecognizable figure of a weeping angel. Beneath the angel was a pathetic legend:

*By his own Hand. Father forgive this Boy, for he was young
and knew not what he did.*

Marcy, not knowing the meaning of the word "suicide," had always wondered what it was the boy had done.

She scraped a fleck of lichen from one of the angel's gray stone curls, hoping that the real angels, the ones in heaven, were prettier and happier-looking than this one. She read the name and the legend again, for the first time connecting the boy's deed with the title of his grave. "Pansy would know," she thought. She made up her mind that at the first opportunity she would ask Pansy—for some warning instinct told her that Mrs. Crittenden would not welcome the question—what a suicide was. The legend under the angel, which might have enlightened her, she interpreted obliquely as children will, assuming it to mean either that the boy lay with his head resting on his hand or that God with His almighty hand had struck him down; for the possibility of self-slaughter had never been mentioned in her presence.

"Marcy!" Mrs. Crittenden suddenly called. "Where are you, honey? Come here and help me a minute."

Marcy picked her way carefully back among the graves, bearing in mind Pansy's often-repeated caution against disturbing the dead. The old Thompson place, the official "haunted house" of the village, stood blank and lonely across the road, lost in a tangle of shrubbery and saplings. Mrs. Crittenden was looking speculatively toward it. "That old place is probably alive with beautiful ferns," she observed as Marcy arrived. Apparently she had forgotten summoning the child. "I suppose it's no use on earth, Pansy, to ask you to go over there and dig me a few."

"No, ma'am," Pansy returned doggedly. "I ain'——"

"Never mind. I'll go myself. You stay here with Pansy, Marcy." Mrs. Crittenden gathered up basket and trowel and left them.

Pansy immediately seized the opportunity to sit down and rest, wiping her damp forehead with a corner of her apron. "Yo' grammaw go' make up 'er own min', I reckon," she said as the little girl sat down on the grass beside her.

"I reckon so," said Marcy, crossing her chubby ankles and pushing back the hair from her heated face. "Pansy, what does suicide mean?"

Pansy jumped; her superstitious eyes moved warily in the direction of Mark Crittenden's grave. "Who bin tellin' you tales, baby chile?"

"Nobody. I just want to know. What does it mean?"

Pansy's sense of propriety engaged in brief but disadvantageous conflict with her natural affinity for the morbid. "Pusson go kill hissef, 'at's committin' suicide."

"Kill himself? How could a person kill himself?"

"'Mos' any ole way." Pansy made a liberal gesture. "Mought take pizen. Mought jump offen a chu'ch steeple. Mought go git in a ribber en drownd hissef. Mought shoot hissef wif a gun. Yes, ma'am; lots o' ways."

Marcy considered this information in the light of the legend on the Suicide's Grave. "Do people get to go to heaven if they kill themselves?"

Pansy again felt the need of proceeding cautiously. "Reckon so, honey, effen dey lub Lord Jesus right good." She shivered dramatically. "But fust dey got to go down in ole cole groun', git to be raw haid en bloody bones, come aroun' hantin' houses in night." She threw an expressive glance toward the old Thompson place. "Ain' goin' git Pansy go anywhurs near ole raw haid en bloody bones. No, ma'am!"

Marcy sat up straight, electrified. "Does everybody have to be raw heads and bloody bones when they die, Pansy?" A delicious chill went over her as she actually pronounced the dread syllables. This was a picture of death strikingly at variance with the one she had been given at Sunday school, or even at home, where she had heard frequent mention from Mrs. Crittenden of angels and rivers of life and streets of gold, and from Miss Crittenden an occasional and untrustful hint of "peace at last, maybe." To these not unpleasing concepts she had added her own impressions of grass and sunshine and lambs and cherubs and crosses wreathed in flowers like those on cards of Easter greeting. "Everybody, Pansy?" she urged incredulously. "White folks, too?"

"Reckon so, honey. Ole wums eat whi' folks same ez cullud."

"Worms?" This was too dramatic even to be terrifying.

Pansy nodded. "Hesh now, honey. Yere come yo' grammaw."

Mrs. Crittenden, her basket full of ferns and her skirts held high, had already crossed the road. "Hurry now, Pansy, and help me get these in before Jed Pickett gets back with the surrey. Marcy, you start putting the things together in the basket, so we'll be ready to go when he comes."

Marcy obeyed absently, her nearly stunned thoughts revolving slowly in a twisting cycloid of amazement. Why, Grandpa was dead; did worms—

She dismissed the ignoble thought without further consideration. Naturally Grandpa would not permit it.

But she looked doubtfully at the other graves. What of Mamma, whom all represented as a sweet and beautiful angel singing perpetual praise before the Great White Throne, and casting her golden crown at the feet of Jesus? What of the innocent baby, whom Marcy had always pictured flitting about the golden-clouded celestial courts like a wren among the honeysuckles, God's heavenly sunshine twinkling on her tiny snowy wings? What of Papa, who—

Marcy stopped short in her packing. Across her mind there had flashed a brief succession of words—words unconnected with anything else she could bring herself to remember; words springing from what hidden source she could not determine, except that they carried about them a decision and finality of tone that reminded her vaguely of her Grandmother Peake: *Look at Marcy's father, a suicide at thirty. . . .*

The kaleidoscopic impressions in the child's mind flew into focus. A suicide is when you kill yourself. Papa had killed himself.

"Marcy!" called Mrs. Crittenden. "Here comes the surrey. Hurry up. What on earth are you dreaming about, child?"

IT WAS characteristic of Marcy, upon whom her elders in the Crittenden household had long ago impressed—far more by example than by precept—the firm definitions of personal and family decorum, that the possibility of seeking further information from Pansy, or indeed from any other outsider, never once occurred to her. It was equally impossible to ask either Auntie or Grandma a direct question concerning Papa's death. Marcy was well aware that Papa was never spoken of without evidences of repressed emotion, and there was a certain hymn—*Nearer, My God, to Thee*—that neither Cynthia Crittenden nor her mother could endure to hear. This hymn had been sung at Papa's funeral.

Yet the realization that Papa had killed himself had made too profound an impression to be easily set aside. Marcy brooded over it all the week, and on Saturday morning slipped alone into the parlor, past the great harp shining in its corner, and looked again at Papa's photographs; the little boy with his brother and sister in the willow cart with two Shetland ponies, the good-looking young officer with the enormous mustache, sometimes standing alone, sometimes grouped with other officers against a tropical background.

These pictures told her nothing. She could remember nothing. She had been less than two years old at the time of her father's death, and her mother, even then, had been dead a year and a half.

Marcy sat down on the carpet beside the harp and pondered deeply. Maybe if she asked Auntie some other things—

At this moment Cynthia Crittenden came in, looking for her. "What are you doing in here by yourself, Marcy? It's a beautiful day outside."

"Looking at Papa's pictures. Aunty, what-all did Papa use to do?"

"Why, you know that, Marcy." Cynthia straightened one of the photographs on the mantelpiece. "He was an army officer."

"No." Marcy tried to explain. "I mean——"

Miss Crittenden studied the earnest little face. "Oh. You mean, what was he like?" She struck a melancholy and meditative chord on the harp; the vibrations died slowly away. "You were pretty fortunate in your father, Marcy, or you would have been, if he hadn't—if he'd lived. In both your parents, for that matter. Agnes was a lovely girl, if she was Hattie Peake's daughter." She paused. "Well—I hardly know how to tell you about your father, Marcy. He was amusing—Mark was the wittiest man I ever knew. He'd read everything and had most of it at his tongue's end. I believe he could have rewritten Shakespeare from memory, and as much of Mark Twain as had been written when he died. Those were his favorites. He and Agnes were—happy. I never saw two people better matched; it was nice just to see them together. It nearly killed him when she died." Cynthia turned away. "Better get out in the sunshine awhile, honey."

"Grandmother Peake said one time she never did want Mamma to marry Papa," ventured Marcy.

"Did she not, indeed!" Cynthia Crittenden laughed. "Run on out and play, now."

Marcy obediently went out, looked without interest at the energetic sunshine, apathetically scratched the ears of Reine, who lay asleep on the veranda, and went back into the house. This time she sought the library. If she could get hold of Grandpa——

But the Major, though he emerged readily enough from the shadows after she had waited a few minutes in silence, shook his head. "No use asking me, Marcy. I don't know what was the

matter with the boy. Just didn't have any gumption, I reckon. None of 'em had any gumption. Stop stewing about your father now. What's done's done."

Marcy pulled from the bookshelves a random volume of her father's Shakespeare and opened it.

*No longer mourn for me when I am dead
Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
Give warning to the world that I have fled
From this vile world, with vilest worms to dwell.*

She closed the book and set it back upon the shelf. The best Shakespeare could do, apparently, was to corroborate both Pansy's information and Grandpa's advice. So far as enlightenment was concerned, she had made no advance.

She felt exasperated and cross. She resented the unfair advantage taken by adults, who surround themselves with mystery yet never dispose of the clues. Marcy knew now where she had heard the words that revealed to her her father's fate; she even remembered other words, exactly as Mrs. Peake had spoken them: "Look at Cynthia. Look at Jay, drinking himself to death. . . ."

Why "look at Cynthia"? Auntie wore her hair braided down her back instead of up on her head like other women, and she stayed at home all the time. Did either of these things justify that tone of scorn? And why had Mrs. Jolly Hunt in Sunday school last week inquired after Auntie in a tone which, though not the same as Grandmother Peake's, was just as peculiar and just as suggestive of secrecy?

Why "drinking himself to death"? How could a person drink himself to death?

Marcy knitted her brows. What had Godfrey said? "Funny how a family will go to pieces like that. . . ."

How could a family go to pieces?

Marcy let her hand fall discordantly on the piano keys and trudged, frowning, out to her swing. Mrs. Crittenden was weed-

ing the tulip bed, her bonnet a glare of white among the bright, bending, sun-filled flowers. "Grandma, what kind of a little boy was Papa?"

"Is that you, honey-pie?" Mrs. Crittenden straightened to her knees. "Why, he was a very mischievous little boy. I remember one day he and Charley Adams cut up your grandpa's harness——"

But Grandma could never talk about Papa; she stopped now and prodded distractedly in the soft earth for a moment, then changed the subject: "He was always lively, not quiet like your Uncle Jay. When Jay was born he was such a poor little thing I never thought we'd save him. You could have put him in a quart cup. But one day a gypsy woman came by, and she told me he'd live to grow up and be my support in my old age. And so he has."

Marcy had heard this story before. So also, apparently, had Cynthia, who now came out of the house, goading the lethargic Reine into plodding along ahead of her. "Did it ever occur to you, Ma," she inquired acidly, seeing Marcy, to all appearances, absorbed in the distant horizon, "to wonder what your support will amount to if Jay ever decides to keep up one of his St. Louis sprees a week or ten days too long? They're a good deal more frequent than they were. And, to judge by his appearance, a good deal more extensive, too."

Mrs. Crittenden's sunbonnet quivered; she did not look up. "Jay's been a good son to me, Daught. And a good brother to you."

"Oh, I'm not blaming Jay. Between us and Lora Jackson, his life is not a merry one. If whisky gets him out of the whole stew, even temporarily, more power to his elbow. I'm merely pointing out that if he ever forgot to come home we'd be caught like rats in a trap. Not that I'd care in the least, if it weren't for Marcy."

Mrs. Crittenden winced at the implied slight but made no attempt at reprisal. "'I have been young and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread,'" she quoted.

"Well, that's cozy," Cynthia laughed curtly. "And I suppose, like the rest of God's sideshow barkers, you never hold your righteousness in question?"

Mrs. Crittenden rose from her knees with an effort. "I never hold God's mercy in question, Daught," she said patiently. "You'd be better off if you had a little faith, yourself, in your Heavenly Father, to keep you from tormenting yourself so—you poor child, you!" She made as if to lay her hand on Cynthia's arm, but the younger woman twitched away from her. "Don't touch me!" she cried.

"Here comes Dr. Trumbull," Marcy suddenly called. "And Diane."

Cynthia Crittenden went quickly into the house. Dr. Trumbull, tying his horse at the gate and lifting Diane out of the buggy, saw her go and, with a barely perceptible shake of his head, followed his little granddaughter up the walk. Diane was ecstatic over her outing; at sight of Marcy she burst into excited questions: "Is this your house? Can I have that red flower? Will that dog bark at me? Where is your mamma? Can I get in that swing?"

Dr. Trumbull, his silvery hair and beard gleaming in the sun, was shaking hands with Mrs. Crittenden. Apparently he at once approached the subject of his call, which seemed to be confidential. Marcy tried hard to catch the low-spoken words, but only disconnected phrases came through at intervals: "It's certainly coming, Jeanie; she'll have to prepare herself for . . . Jay knows it, of course, whether he's said anything yet or not; no government matter ever escapes Jay. . . . Yes, I know . . . the only thing I can do, if she'll let me, is . . . I know. It's hard. It's hard. If you could just—"

"Is that a dog?" Diane broke in. "Can I have your doll? Why don't you go to Sunday school? What—"

"Hush, Diane!" Marcy besought her, goaded past all endurance. "Hush just a minute, can't you?"

Mrs. Crittenden twitched nervously at her bonnet string.

"Won't you come in and talk to her yourself, Doctor? Maybe she'll listen to you. Come let me get you a drop of peach brandy."

"I'll talk to her, of course, if you think she'll——" Dr. Trumbull offered Mrs. Crittenden his arm, and they turned away.

"Where is Grandpa going?" demanded Diane, tugging at Marcy's sleeve. "What is your dog's name? Do you want to play train? Will your grandma come back? Did——"

An hour later Dr. Trumbull came out of the house, looking ruffled and indignant, and called Diane to follow him to the buggy. He called somewhat curtly in farewell to Marcy, clucked to his horse, and was gone.

Marcy felt aggrieved by this dismissal. Dr. Trumbull had never spoken so shortly to her before.

Her irritation at Diane's constant interrupting questions still possessed her. She resented everything and everybody, including old Tom Tolliver, who at that moment ambled along the street in a mood of deep abstraction, doubtless elaborating further refinements of the amiable frauds that were his chief claim to distinction.

"Old thing," Marcy thought bitterly. "Old thing. Just got out of jail."

She sighed heavily, slid out of the swing, and went into the house to find Aunty. The sound of the harp swept across the hall as she entered, and she paused tentatively in the parlor doorway. Sometimes she could go in when Aunty played and sometimes not. This time, however, Aunty smiled at her. "Come on in," she said.

Marcy went in and sat down on the floor. "Play *Silvery Waves*, Aunty?"

Miss Cynthia was agreeable. Marcy could see that she considered herself to have got the better of Dr. Trumbull in the recent controversy. She began to play *Silvery Waves*. "What have you been doing all morning, Marcy?"

"Nothing. Talking to Diane." Marcy scuffed her toe on the floor.

"Oh, of course. Diane was here, too." The rippling runs filled the parlor. "And how's Diane?"

"I don't know." Marcy paused. "Aunty. Old Tom Tolliver's out of jail. I saw him."

"I didn't know he was in jail."

"He sold skinned cats for squirrels," Marcy informed her moodily.

Cynthia laughed. "Did anybody eat them?"

"Lots of people." Marcy became faintly interested. "Inez says last year he got run out of Ohio for selling a funny kind of weeds and telling people they were South American tomato plants."

For an instant the melody of *Silvery Waves* faltered; then it rose again, with a slightly quickened tempo. "When was Tom Tolliver in Ohio?" Miss Crittenden inquired casually.

"Last spring, Inez said. And she said he got run out."

"Inez seems to know everything." Cynthia played a sparkling run. "Did she say what he's doing with himself now that he's out of jail?"

Marcy scrambled to her feet, her interest thoroughly quickened now. "She says her papa says old Tom always lives in the old haunted house by the graveyard whenever he's not in jail. Do you reckon he does sure enough, Aunty?"

Cynthia Crittenden struck a resolute chord. "Who knows?" she said. But, for some reason that Marcy could not fathom, the news of old Tom Tolliver had excited her. She rose from the harp and walked swiftly across the room, then back. "I may surprise everybody yet!" she cried.

Marcy did not understand. Nor did she understand the strange eagerness of Aunty's manner, which lasted all day; nor Aunty's determination to see that she, Marcy, had a pleasant Saturday, even making fudge and cookies for her and reading to her a full hour in the middle of the afternoon. It was almost as though Aunty were grateful to her.

The vagaries of adults, however, can seldom be understood.

Marcy accepted the happy day placidly and went to bed at the end of it almost entirely content in spite of the unsettled questions that nibbled at the edges of her mind.

She had been asleep some two hours when she was awakened by the scratch and flare of a lighted match. Auntie stood at the bedside, lighting the lamp. She wore a long monklike brown robe, a corded and tasseled dressing gown she had had ever since Marcy could remember. It had a heavy dark cowl, and Auntie's white face and dark pompadour above it looked strange and remote in the upward-surfing yellow light of the lamp. "I put this on for a coat; it's not really chilly out," Auntie said. She sat down on the bed and smiled at the astonished little girl. "Marcy, how would you like to go with me for a walk?"

"Now? In the night?" Marcy asked in unbounded amazement.

Auntie nodded. "It isn't very far into the night. You went to bed early. It's only half-past nine." She began to help Marcy into her shoes and stockings.

"Where are we going, Auntie?"

"Who knows?" said Auntie again. But she said it gaily. "You're not afraid to go out at night, are you?"

"No," Marcy said scornfully. "Do I have to wear a coat?"

"Your light one. It's damp and dewy outside."

Their whispered conversation had been heard by Reine, who now appeared in the doorway, whining. "Can Reine go, too?" Marcy asked.

Cynthia nodded. "Hurry. Be quiet." She ushered child and dog out of the house, closed the front door silently, and led them out by the front gate. The great pine murmured as they passed beneath it. Thousands of stars were out, and an occasional puff of white and silvery cloud briefly obscured their brilliance, now here, now there. A heavy dew covered the broad plantain and burdock leaves by the roadside and the clumps of wild mustard in the fence corners.

"It's a beautiful night," Cynthia Crittenden said. "Are you warm enough, Marcy?"

"Yes. Which way are we going, Auntie?"

"Up over the hill. Out that way."

Marcy stopped short in her tracks. "Out by the cemetery?"

"Why not? You're not afraid of the cemetery, are you?"

Marcy shook her head. She was not afraid of anything while Auntie was with her. "What are we going out there for, Auntie?"

"Never mind. Look at the stars, Marcy. Here's a poem for you:

*I arise from dreams of thee
In the first sweet sleep of night,
When the winds are breathing low
And the stars are shining bright. . . .*

That's Shelley, and a night like this one. Nobody could write about beauty like Shelley and Shakespeare, Marcy."

"I read some Shakespeare," Marcy volunteered. "About worms and dead people."

Miss Cynthia nodded. "Yes; I remember. 'No longer mourn for me'——" She laughed breathlessly and caught Marcy's hand. "Here's a prettier one, Marcy:

*. . . love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown although his height be taken. . . .*

That's too hard for you, isn't it?"

"I guess so," Marcy admitted reluctantly. "But I like to hear it, anyhow, Auntie."

Cynthia smiled and squeezed her hand. "You're like your father, Marcy. You love words. Mark was the only person I ever

knew that understood what words can mean to people, except——” She checked herself. “Look, Marcy; up there’s the Milky Way. That long stretch of white.”

Marcy looked at the Milky Way obediently but without passion. “Except who, Aunty?” she urged.

“Somebody I used to know. A man.” Cynthia Crittenden smiled suddenly in the darkness. “It was the one who sent me the valentine.”

“Did he die, Aunty?”

“No. He went away.” Cynthia hesitated. “He went away to Ohio. Where old Tom Tolliver’s been.”

“Oh,” said Marcy. She thrust two fingers under Reine’s collar and wriggled them in the long hair of the dog’s ruff. They were approaching the cemetery now; high on the rounded hill the white stones loomed against the night. In the haunted house over the way a small flickering light was burning. A whippoorwill called sadly, again and again, from the neighboring woods.

“Let’s see if Mr. Tolliver’s at home,” Aunty suggested casually. “It’s a little late for a call, but——”

Marcy waited, her mind suspended in the shadows, as Aunty knocked on the door of the haunted house. The light inside bobbed suddenly, as though with surprise, and disappeared around a corner. A moment later the rusty knob was turned from the inside, and the meditative countenance of old Tom Tolliver appeared in advance of a giant shadow.

The old man blinked at them over his lighted candle. “Howdy, ladies?” he said half questioningly.

“How do you do, Mr. Tolliver?” Cynthia laughed lightly. “We were passing, and I saw your light. I thought perhaps you would let us have a drink of water.”

“Shorely, ma’am. Come in.” Tolliver ushered them into the broken and cobwebby interior of the haunted house, setting his candle down on a dusty table beside the paper-covered book he had been reading. “Just have a cheer, ma’am; I’ll be glad to bring

y'uns a drink." He made off kitchenward, lighting another candle on the way.

Marcy looked uneasily about her, recalling Pansy's raw heads and bloody bones with uncomfortable vividness as a rat, its little eyes red and evil in the shadows, scurried across a corner of the floor. Reine was after it with a snarl, but it escaped by a hair's breadth into a hole under the baseboard.

"I hear you've been in Ohio recently, Mr. Tolliver," Auntie remarked conversationally as the old man returned with a graniteware bucket and a leaky dipper. "Were you anywhere near Dayton?"

"Well, yes, ma'am," Tolliver said with some embarrassment. "I did put in a week or so round about Dayton. That 'uz last spring, 'bout a year ago. Warn't there long, though."

Auntie murmured politely, "I used to know a few people in Dayton. Did you happen to run across anyone named Barker? Elliott or Ethel Barker?"

Tolliver considered. "Barker? No, ma'am; I don't know as I did."

"Or Brown?" Auntie hesitated. "Clifton Brown? He went to Dayton, somebody told me."

Tom Tolliver nodded. "Oh, yes, ma'am, I remember Clifton. He used to live right here in this town. Been twenty year or more, I reckon. Yes. Him and his son runs a newspaper there in Dayton."

There was a brief silence. "Oh," Cynthia Crittenden said composedly. "His son. He married, then."

"He married a Whittaker from Kentucky, yes, ma'am. Had quite a fam'ly, I reckon." Tolliver's shrewd old eyes were suddenly comprehending. "Can't I git you a little more water, ma'am?"

"No, thank you." Cynthia rose with dignity. "Are those tomato plants you have over there in the corner, Mr. Tolliver?" she asked.

The old rogue moved uneasily. "Yes, ma'am; in a manner o' speakin', them's tomato plants, though not like none you git around here. They come—" He cleared his throat. "They come from Ecuador."

"Let me have half a dozen," Miss Crittenden ordered, opening her purse.

"Well, now, ma'am—" Tolliver was reluctant. "I d'know's you'd hardly be satisfied—"

"Half a dozen," Cynthia repeated as though she had not heard him. "And wrap their roots well, please. Come, Marcy." She paid for the handful of dying weeds. "We must go home," she added, calling Reine to her.

Tolliver picked up the candle to light them to the door; its glow fell full upon Cynthia, showing her face white as death above the dark cowl of her robe, her eyes ghastly. "Come, Marcy," she said again.

They walked in silence unbroken save by the light grinding of their footsteps in the fine gravel. Halfway home, Cynthia Crittenden looked once at the South American tomato plants and tossed them over a fence, saying nothing. But a few steps farther on she spoke: "I'll give you another quotation, Marcy. 'Men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them'—I suggest you remember this, Marcy—and worms have eaten them, but not for love.'" She laughed a little wildly; her white face and slender hands gleamed in the starlight. "But not for love."

Marcy looked at her with troubled eyes. Worms again! "Aunty—" she began.

"But not for love," Cynthia Crittenden repeated. She beat the tassels of her robe lightly up and down on Reine's broad, unconscious back, her voice rising against the silence of the night. "No, no, no, no. But not for love, Marcy. But not for love."

MARCY HAD some difficulty that night in going to sleep, for the ghastly pallor of Auntie's face hung before her like a tragic mask even after Auntie had blown out the light and left her. Cynthia had not come to bed; she had gone back downstairs, though it was now near midnight. The uneasy child, alone under the wide white counterpane, could still hear her as she moved about below. There was a faint metallic sound like the clicking of a small lock, and subsequently there was a rustle of tissue paper, a thing in Marcy's mind associated almost exclusively with Christmas Eve; but, although she strained her ears to the utmost, she could make nothing of that, nor of the perturbation of old Reine, whose restless movements she heard now and then as though the dog were following her mistress from place to place and whining with anxiety. Presently the heavy front door opened and closed again softly, and Marcy, sitting up in bed, saw her aunt and the old setter come out and move down the walk toward the great pine at the gate. Auntie had taken off the brown robe, the child thought, puzzled; was she in her nightgown? Why—

Marcy slid out of bed and crept over to the window, her eyes wide. Auntie was dressed up. Her braid was wound about her head, and she wore a long trailing gown of filmy white with deep falls of lace, such a gown as Marcy had never seen before. Her white fingers were interlaced with Reine's shabby collar, and as she reached the foot of the giant pine she sat down on a moss-covered root, still holding the dog near her. The night was too

dark and the distance too great for Marcy to see her face clearly; she saw only its whiteness, scarcely less definite than the whiteness of the dress, and its wraithlike quality beneath the coronal of brown hair. Reine lay motionless at the woman's feet.

The child at the window watched and pondered; but, as the long moments passed and neither still figure stirred from its position, her uneasy, half-apprehensive curiosity overcame her. She crept softly across the room and into the hall. Could she slip downstairs without anyone's hearing her, and find out what Auntie had been doing?

She felt her way down and into the parlor, where the light of a single candle splashed the room with pallid radiance. The strings of Cynthia's harp gleamed gold in the darkness. In the middle of the floor lay an open cherrywood box. Marcy's heart beat faster; it was the inlaid box with the mother-of-pearl garlands that had stood all her life on top of the heavy old secretary. She had never been permitted to look into it.

She tiptoed warily toward it. At first glance it seemed to be empty except for the heap of tissue from which Cynthia's white dress had been taken, but a closer approach revealed a drift of shredded parchment paper covered with handwriting in faded brownish ink, and two stiff-backed photographs bent and cracked as though by a convulsive grasp.

Stealthily Marcy put forth her hand and took up the photographs. One of them was Auntie; there was no mistaking the proud and graceful carriage of the head, although the ardent young face was almost as unfamiliar as the face of a stranger. Of the Cynthia Crittenden she knew, Marcy had more than once heard people say, "She looks like a walking dead woman," and, although she had resented the remark with all the idolatrous loyalty of her nature, she knew in her heart that it was not unjustified. Auntie's face was almost as white now as the tissue paper in the box, and the lips that in the photograph were parted with the expectancy

of love were pale and awry with pain. Aunty had always been beautiful to Marcy; but this exquisite, fearless, tender girl in the picture . . .

Without knowing why, Marcy felt her throat draw together and thicken. She remembered Aunty's voice, not three hours ago, reciting the poem of Shakespeare about love. The connection was not clear to the child, nor did she know why it was she felt like crying. Had she been somewhat older she might have known that what she held in her hand was proof—as valid proof as any mortal being may expect to find—of the true existence of that love which is “the star to every wandering bark.” When Marcy had called Cynthia beautiful “like a princess in a fairy tale” she had come closer truth than she knew. Some instinct deeper than thought had pointed out to her the quality in Cynthia of which great loves and fabulous lives are made, and the same instinct now taught her, as she stood looking at the photograph in her hand, that if Cynthia's life and Cynthia's love had failed of their fruition the cause lay outside Cynthia herself.

She looked at the other picture. It was a young man. He had a delightful, poetic, amiable face, not strong. His mouth, sensitive and humorous, was his best feature; the pose of his head had the alert gaiety of a spaniel waiting for a ball to be tossed. Was this Clifton Brown? Yes, it must be, for there was his name signed in rapid but uneven script on one of the torn-up letters. And there, on another scrap far back in a corner of the box, were four words in the same writing, but darker and more intense: “My beautiful! My beautiful!”

Marcy laid the photographs back where she had found them. Guilt invaded her; she began to know that what she had done was discreditable. She tiptoed back up the stairs and looked out at the window. Neither Cynthia nor the dog had moved. Their figures under the pine tree were immobile as the figures in a painting.

The child clambered back into bed and lay staring into the dark. She was lonely and sleepy, and there was an uncomfortable stinging about her eyes, but she could not go to sleep.

She remembered the sound of the tissue paper. "Christmas," she murmured to herself, making use of a favorite device of hers to woo the pleasant dreams of holiday. "Christmas Eve. Santa Claus," she repeated several times, watching the shining tree emerge punctually from the shadows, aglow with candlelit tinsel and bubbles of fluted glass.

Sleep, however, when it came at last, was still beset with trouble, for Marcy had a nightmare, the first in her experience. In this dream Tom Tolliver led her through shoulder-high burdock to the graveyard and pointed to the Major's monument, and there tearing at the stone, still in her long white dress, stood Aunty with Reine beside her. But when she heard them and turned it was not Aunty, it was a snow-white skull, and the bones of a hand under the lace, and a skeleton dog beside them.

Marcy screamed—and made no sound. She could not scream. She must scream.

She could not scream. She must—

"Marcy! Marcy, wake up! What on earth's the matter?" Cynthia Crittenden in her nightgown, the brown robe thrown hurriedly about her shoulders, had caught her up from the pillow. "Did you have a bad dream, honey?"

Marcy nodded, clinging and gasping.

"Well, don't cry; it's all over now. Go back to sleep." Cynthia patted her gently on the back as she turned her over and settled her comfortably. "You must have eaten something. Go to sleep now. You'll be all right in the morning."

She was reading in the library when Marcy came downstairs next day, and she looked up and smiled at the little girl. "Feeling better?" she inquired. "Come let Aunty feel you." She drew Marcy to her and touched her cheek and temple. "Put out your tongue. Yes, that's what I thought; it's a little bit coated. Don't

you think maybe you'd better stay in bed awhile? It's going to be a hot day, anyhow."

Marcy shook her head impatiently. She felt cross and tired. Even the sight of the sabers over the mantel aroused no interest in her. It seemed to her that there was a peculiar odor in the room. "I don't feel good," she complained.

Miss Cynthia forbore to correct the "good." "I know you don't. That's why you'd better go back to bed for an hour or two."

Marcy shook her head again, repressing an impulse to put a hand up to it, for it swam a little when she moved it. Was she going to be sick? "I had a bad dream last night," she stated.

Miss Cynthia smiled. "I should say you did. What was it?"

Marcy hesitated. She could not remember. There had been something about a white dress, and the pine tree. "It was crazy," she said moodily. "Aunt, you haven't got a—"

Her gaze fell suddenly upon the fireplace beneath the crossed sabers. There had been a fire recently, in spite of the heat, and a scorched bit of lace, still faintly smoking, lay caught beneath the end of one of the charred sticks. That was the smell in the room—burning cloth! Marcy's gaze, fascinated and fixed by the web of broken brown threads, grew wide and tense; it had not been a dream?

"I haven't got a what?" Cynthia prompted her.

Marcy dragged her heavy eyes upward. "Nothing," she said dully. "I reckon I'll go back to bed."

"I think you'd better, for a while, anyway. Ma will fix you some breakfast and I'll bring it up. Come, I'll go with you now and get you settled."

Marcy plodded upstairs after her aunt, new puzzles buzzing like wasps in her mind. This was not by any means the first question that had arisen concerning Aunt, which could not be settled by appeal to Aunt herself, but it was the most disquieting, for it had an immediacy not shared by any of the others. This was a matter of last night, of only a few hours ago: Aunt, Aunt, did

you have a white dress, what was it for, where did you keep it, why didn't you ever show it to me, why did you burn it up in the middle of the night? No, these questions could never be asked. Marcy, in bed again, turned from side to side, knotting her coverlet into a bed-wide snarl. Her thoughts rocked away from each other, refusing correlation. Aunty, there isn't any such a thing as a skeleton dog, is there? Tom Tolliver has a rat instead of a dog, he keeps a rat. Aunty, I don't feel good, read me something. "Go away, Reine, you're so hot!" she complained aloud, irritably, pushing the dog impatiently away from the bedside.

"Get out, Reine," Cynthia ordered. "Marcy's sick." She unbuttoned Marcy's nightgown. "Let me look at your chest."

Mrs. Crittenden appeared at the head of the stairs. "Is the child sick?"

Cynthia nodded. "Better see if you can get hold of Johnny Parsons and send him after Trumbull. I think she's got the measles."

Dr. Trumbull came forthwith, and the shades were pulled down and the shutters closed. The room, deprived of whatever breeze might otherwise have crept into it, grew breathlessly hot. Cynthia sat patiently beside the bed, fanning Marcy with a palm-leaf fan and reading to her by the flickering light of a shaded candle. "You must keep the sheet over you at least, Marcy," she said from time to time, replacing it.

"I can't. It's hot. Aunty, have I got the measles? Did Dr. Trumbull say I had the measles?"

Cynthia nodded and pulled the sheet up. Marcy began to cry.

"I don't feel good," she moaned, attempting to rub her smarting eyes. "Inez hasn't got 'em, has she? Aunty, has she?"

"It," Miss Cynthia corrected her automatically. "Not that I know of. Don't rub your eyes, Marcy!" She pulled the child's arm gently down.

Marcy flounced and sniffled. "It's no sense saying *it* when it's them," she argued obscurely. "Read, Aunty, why don't you?"

"If you'll be good and keep the sheet on. What shall I read?"

"Polly Pepper?" In health Marcy scorned the Peppers as long since outgrown, but in weakness she reverted easily to the tastes of her immaturity.

"All right." Miss Crittenden laid down her fan and rose to get the book. "I'll read you the story Polly told when Phronsie had the measles."

This timely suggestion met the moment's need, and Marcy permitted herself to be read to sleep. She slept heavily for some time, and when she was aroused it was with a vague sense of surprise at something out of the ordinary. She forced herself to listen, and came fuzzily to the realization that Dr. Trumbull, who had left the house before she went to sleep, was back again, talking with Aunty in the library. His voice did not sound quite as usual, but Marcy was accustomed to the manner of adult to adult as distinguished from that of adult to child, and she paid little attention to what she heard until Aunty's voice responded sharply. It was at once evident that they were not discussing Marcy's measles.

"Well, Doctor," Cynthia Crittenden was saying in a tone of icy finality, "if that's the best you can do, it will just have to come to an end, and that's all there is to it. I'll make no such attempt as you suggest. I told you last week I wouldn't. We've tried that before."

"It's worth trying again. Come, Cynthia, think what it would mean if we succeeded."

Cynthia's tone was abruptly bitter. "Well, what would it mean? At this time of day, what could it mean—to me?"

"It might mean anything. You're still a young woman."

Cynthia laughed harshly. "You're mistaken. You're thinking of someone else. I'm an old dead woman, Dr. Trumbull. I've been dead nearly twenty years. I was murdered by my father, don't you remember? The great Major Crittenden. The Pericles of the——"

The doctor made a weary sound. "We've been over that so often, Cynthia."

"Then let me alone, why don't you?" Cynthia pushed back her

chair and rose, pacing. "This will be the end, I tell you, and nothing but the end. And a good thing, too." The passion died out of her voice. "It's just as well. I appreciate your interest, Dr. Trumbull. But it's a long time now since there was anything to justify my existence. What earthly difference does it make?"

Dr. Trumbull spoke sternly. "The justification for your existence—the *necessity* for your existence, Cynthia—is upstairs in the south bedroom. I hope you'll not forget it. Good day." He set the ferrule of his gold-headed cane hard against the floor once, twice, three times; then, without coming upstairs to see Marcy, he was gone.

Marcy, herself upstairs in the south bedroom, looked about her for a moment with some curiosity, as though she expected to recognize the justification for Aunt's existence among the pin trays and perfume flacons on the dresser. But she was feverish and heavy with sleep, and, although the conversation registered itself as usual in her stubbornly retentive memory, it did not succeed in keeping her drowsy lids apart. Mrs. Crittenden, concerned lest some wind of contention had carried abovestairs, tiptoed once to the open door and looked within; but, seeing the child unquestionably asleep, she turned away and went silently from the room.

— 11 —

HAVING THE measles, in spite of the great and indubitable new importance of being fed from special dishes and not being allowed to read even large print, was a decidedly unpleasant experience to Marcy. She was painfully ill for eight or nine days, and when the acute discomfort subsided and her aunt, wearied with watching, reading, and soothing, relaxed a little her efforts to lighten the boredom of convalescence, she found her imprisonment hard indeed to bear. A letter had come from Inez Colton: *Derr Marsey I take my pin in hand To let you no You hav got*

the mzeels wen You Get wel I mite com Over youre trueley Inez. This letter Marcy read many times in spite of all prohibitions. Its creases, between the faint blue lines of the ruled tablet paper on which it was penciled, were dark with folding and wrinkled from being crushed in Marcy's hot little hand under the pillow.

Other offerings, too, had come. Mrs. Trumbull frequently sent some delicacy by the doctor; Uncle Jay had brought this and that; and Dr. Trumbull himself had promised to give Marcy, on condition that she would take her pink medicine cheerfully, the adorable little graduated glass beaker in which it was prepared. Marcy looked at the beaker with resentment and distaste; it was impossible now to remember the hungry desire it had aroused in her at the beginning.

On the first day she was allowed to sit up in a chair and take solid food her Grandmother Peake came to call, bringing a little round loaf of bread she had baked especially for Marcy. Marcy's eyes shone; Grandmother Peake's bread was famous, and the tiny loaf was so fairylike, so unutterably enchanting. Aunty cut her off a slice and buttered it. As usual, she had found herself unable to summon courage to thank her grandmother, but as the delicious taste of the buttered bread comforted her soup-surfeited little palate she could not refrain from murmuring, "It's good," with her eyes, grateful as a patted pup's, on her grandmother's face.

"Good, is it?" Mrs. Peake chuckled complacently. "Well, come over some Saturday morning after you get well, and I'll show you how to make it."

Marcy was incredulous. "Could I make it?"

"Why not? A great big girl like you. I helped my mother bake when I was seven."

Marcy looked inquiringly toward her aunt for confirmation. None was forthcoming. A tinge of hostile color had come into Cynthia's white cheeks, and she rose and busied herself with straightening the medicine bottles on the dresser.

"What are you going to do when you grow up," Mrs. Peake demanded, transfixing Marcy with her inimitable glare of investigation, "if you don't learn how to do these things? Your children'll have hangnails." She chuckled again, but there was soreness beneath the laughter.

Cynthia Crittenden tightened her lips and then opened them. "Not being half-witted, I dare say she'll manage," she remarked acidly. "Anybody that can read—and strike a match—can learn to cook when occasion requires."

Mrs. Peake twitched her rocker a little forward and leaned back again, affecting to smile amiably. "She sounded to me, a minute ago, as if she'd rather like to learn to make bread. Wouldn't you, Marcy?"

Marcy, fully aware now of the tension between the two women, was silent. Secretly she did feel that she would give anything to learn to make the little loaf, but it was perfectly apparent that her feeling so would be, for some mysterious reason, displeasing to Auntie. Was it because it was wrong to make bread, or because it was wrong to do what Grandmother Peake wanted her to? Marcy knew well enough that there was no great love lost between the two houses of her family, and she did not know what she could say that would not offend one of them. But just as the silence became painful she heard Grandma coming upstairs and sighed with relief. Grandma would save the situation, if only through the conventional need of greetings.

"I hear we're going to have a revival," Mrs. Crittenden observed when these were over.

Mrs. Peake nodded. "So I hear. Well, it'll break the monotony." She chuckled. "I never had so much fun in my life as I did at the last one."

Mrs. Crittenden smiled politely but with effort. Her piety was too all-embracing to condone levity toward any form of religion. One of Marcy's earliest—and later one of her most treasured—memories was of this gracious and dignified little grandmother

singing placidly, as she stood among her fellow townswomen on the sawdust-covered floor of the hastily erected revival "tabernacle," the idiotic words of some improvised appeal for funds:

*Everybody ought to give a dollar,
A dollar,
A dollar;
Put it in the pan
To help the preacher man;
Everybody ought to give a dollar.*

"You heard about Godfrey and the last revival preacher, didn't you?" Mrs. Peake continued. "Corey, I mean. He ramped and raved and ranted all over the platform as usual, and when he got ready to call the sinners in he saw Godfrey sitting with Pete Mason at the back, grinning like a possum, and he made up his mind he'd save him. So he pranced back there and caught hold of Godfrey's hand and bleated at him, 'Brother, my young brother, are you washed in the Blood?' Godfrey told him he never discussed his personal affairs with strangers."

Mrs. Crittenden looked shocked and disapproving. "What did the preacher say?"

"Oh, he forgot all about saving the rest of the sinners and hopped back up on the platform and preached another sermon. Called Godfrey everything he could lay his tongue to. Said his mother must be proud of him! I told Godfrey if I'd been there I'd have gotten up and announced that his mother *was* proud of him and always had been. Godfrey's got more brains in his little finger—" She paused and turned again to Cynthia, deliberately baiting her. "You'll have to keep an eye on Marcy this time, or she'll be getting herself saved. She's ripe for it. I thought she was going to make it last summer."

Cynthia smiled grimly. "Not if I can help it."

Mrs. Crittenden looked from one to the other, troubled. Marcy felt sorry for her. She knew that Grandma, Churchwoman or no,

would have liked her to be saved. Marcy herself was a good deal more interested than anybody but Mrs. Peake had been shrewd enough to suspect. She could remember the last revival, the singing and the tears, the impassioned plea to come forward, the agony of resisting the long-drawn soft strains of *Almost Persuaded*. "Almost—but lost!" the dread climax echoed in her memory. Marcy's physical appearance suggested nothing so much as a baby or a big-eyed puppy, but emotionally she was ahead of herself. Her near isolation from her agefellows, broken only by her friendship with the younger Inez, her visits to Diane Trumbull, and her tentative and never successful contacts at school, had made her ready for experiences two years at least beyond her age.

Experiences in the tabernacle, however, were patently not for her. Nobody but Grandma would forgive her for having them. The Major would be furious. "God's bath and breakfast, Marcy!" he would say. "After all the time I've spent on you, after all the things I've told you and Cynthia's told you—Cynthia's intelligent, if she is a fool—you go and make a spectacle of yourself over that third-rate Holy Joe cavorting on a woodpile down there in Mason's back lot. I'm ashamed of you. You're a disgrace to the family. Never mind what Grandma said. Don't go ringing in Grandma; you can't get out of it that way. Grandma, hell. Don't you Grandma me. When it's Jeanie, that's different."

Marcy sighed. She didn't know why it was different, why it was all right for Grandpa's Jeanie to "come forward in search of a blessing" and all wrong for his Marcy to follow her. And Grandpa would not tell her. He had behaved all through her illness in the most incomprehensible manner, refusing to manifest himself by more than the gleam of a saber even when she needed him most. Had she disgraced him by having the measles, too? Marcy would have supposed that a doctor—

But no; now that she came to think of it, Grandpa had apparently shuffled off his civilian profession along with his mortal coil, and in his posthumous relations with his little granddaughter had

been all soldier. Perhaps soldiers thought both religion and illness contemptible. Yet in his lifetime he had found relish in his profession, as a number of his anecdotes testified.

"I went up to see Mittie Henley one night," he would recount as Marcy swung idly in the rope swing under the paradise tree, "and found her moaning and groaning with the bellyache as usual. 'What you been eating?' I asked her. 'Oh, Doctor,' she says, 'oh, Doctor, I ain't et a livin' thing sence breakfast, and then it wasn't nothing but some coffee and dry toast.' Well, by God, I said to myself, we'll see about that. So I gave her a good big dose of ipecac." He paused for effect, his bright blue eyes on Marcy's. "Whoopee! Cabbage. Pickles. Coconut. Berry pie. Catfish. Sorghum molasses." He smiled with reminiscent satisfaction. "You ought to have seen Mit's face."

The convalescent Marcy in her quilt-draped chair, her vagrant dimple coming and going as she remembered Grandpa's story, was aroused suddenly from these reveries to see Mrs. Peake gathering up purse and parasol to go home, and realized that she had missed a part of the conversation.

"—wouldn't be surprised," Miss Cynthia was saying. "It's been so unbearably hot, there's almost certain to be an electrical storm pretty soon." She shivered slightly at the idea, accompanying Mrs. Peake to the stairway door.

That redoubtable dowager, to whom the last word in argument was ever dear, looked over her shoulder as she went to say encouragingly to Marcy, "Get well as quick as you can, and if your Auntie changes her mind about the bread, let me know." She nodded briskly and made good her departure before Cynthia could retort.

"THAT WOMAN makes me so all-fired mad I could bite a nail in two," Cynthia remarked to her mother after Mrs. Peake had gone. "She'll hate me as long as she lives for choosing to feed Marcy out of a different bowl from hers." But she spoke absently rather than with irritation, for the sky was rapidly darkening, and a churning mutter of distant thunder could already be heard. "Yes, there's going to be a storm. Here comes Reine with her ears laid back, poor old girl!"

The terrified dog dashed up the stairs and into the bedroom, and Marcy laughed aloud to see her whisk agitatedly under the bed. "Reine's afraid! Reine's afraid!" she chanted in derision.

Her aunt smiled faintly. "If I followed my natural impulse I'd be right under there with her," she confessed. "I can't understand, Marcy, how it is that you're not scared to death every time it storms, living in the same house with Ma and me and Reine. There can't be anything in example."

Mrs. Crittenden had caught up a shawl and was pinning it hastily over her head. "I must go cover up my chickens."

Marcy paid no heed to them. She had twisted around in her chair, the quilt slipping from her, and was gazing eagerly out the window at the trees beginning to toss in the rising gale. A great storm, with thunder and lightning and fast-driving wind, was an exaltation to Marcy; she knew then what it was to feel fierce wings at her shoulders, to be armed with a lance of light. She

knew then what it was to ride beside the Major as his equal and comrade, rejoicing as he rejoiced in the conflict, laughing in the tempest's teeth. "Hah! That was a good one!" she could hear him shout at her through the elemental clamor, as a jagged violet seam split open in the sky and the trees were lashed double under the rain. "Oh, don't shut it, Aunty!" she begged as Cynthia moved toward the window. "It isn't coming in yet."

Miss Crittenden, her pale tense face paler and more strained than ever, withheld her hand for the moment. "I wonder if Mrs. Peake got home all right," she murmured, but obviously without realizing any meaning in the words. Her hand at the curtain trembled with nervousness. "I'll have to shut it, Marcy. I can't stand it any longer. Besides, the wind's turning—look there!" A patter of flying drops was flung into the room, and she banged the window down as the first deafening thunderclap shattered the air. Reine, under the bed, pawed the floor and yelped aloud in anguish, and Cynthia knelt and put a shaking hand beneath the counterpane to comfort her.

Woman and dog crouched motionless together through the furious half-hour that followed. Marcy, her rapt gaze fixed on the window, was oblivious to everything but the magnificence of the storm; her very veins seemed filled with it. Mrs. Crittenden had returned from driving her chickens into shelter, but she was too nervous to sit still. She wandered here and there about the room, flinching visibly at every fresh assault of lightning and wind. "All my new slips at the cemetery'll be washed right out," she lamented, wringing her little hands; but, like her daughter, she spoke automatically. The cemetery slips were no longer real to her. Nothing was real but the clamor and chaos beyond the window.

At the climax of the storm it grew so dark that Cynthia, over Marcy's almost tearful protest, insisted upon her mother's lighting a lamp. She herself remained at Reine's side on the floor, stroking the dog's shuddering back with a cold hand.

Yet of them all Marcy was most exhausted when it was over. Her excitement and elation added to the inroads of the measles had been too much for her, and she was more than ready to be put back to bed. She fell asleep almost at once, still coursing among the clouds; it was as though she departed in great, slow, soaring leaps past the receding black and purple thunderheads, over the tasseled tops of the dripping trees into the boundless sea of clear light beyond. She was alone now; Grandpa had vanished. She had reached an impossible height, a height beyond time and space. She was asleep.

Cynthia covered her lightly. "I can remember feeling that way at a concert, but——"

"What did you say, Daught?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking of the way Marcy loves a storm." Cynthia pulled her braid over her shoulder and began to undo it, her fingers still shaking. Suddenly she whirled to face her mother. "Let me tell you right now, Ma, that any man who does what Pa did—fails to provide for his family after he's locked every door they've tried to open for themselves—is a murderer and worse than a murderer. How long is it since any of us have had so much as our noses outside this miserable little hole of a town? Even to St. Louis—even to Cape Girardeau! How long is it? How long?"

"Why, Daught——"

"You and Marcy could go if you had the money, couldn't you?" Cynthia flung her braid back over her shoulder and turned away. "I'm not talking about myself. That's all over for me and has been for a long time. But no. Even you can't go, because Pa—because Pa——" She choked and went abruptly from the room.

Mrs. Crittenden's breast rose and fell in a deep sigh as she opened Marcy's window to the cooled air of the outdoors. Cynthia was too much for her at all times, and at times like these she was utterly incomprehensible. Perhaps it was not to be expected of the Major's slim-waisted Jeanie that she should understand

this latest outburst to have arisen from the fact that Marcy, at nine, had never heard a strain of symphonic music.

Actually Miss Crittenden's frustrated fury was uncalled for in this instance. Marcy had not missed the symphony. The child was a little human sounding board for impressions and emotions, and it was a rare hour when she was not being almost overwhelmed with both. Her conceptions of beauty, moreover, were stalwart as well as sweeping; she had the Major as a pattern, and he tolerated no littleness of view.

"Don't you be one of these mincy little pigeon-toed daisy smellers, Marcy," he counseled her. "Too many like that already. If a thing's scalloped and round and pink, or if it jingles when they shake it, they like it. If it's beautiful, they either can't see it at all or it offends them. You take Noble Q. Harrison down at the drugstore, writes all that poetry about the pretty buttercups and moss-covered rocks. Well, some time you get a good look at Noble Q. when he's watching old Charley Bates plow his forty-acre field, and see if you don't think he looks like a man that's just been given a double dose of castor oil. Charley blots out the birds and the trees and the field and the furrows and the sky and the clouds and the whole damned landscape for Noble; but I swear to you, Marcy, I can't look at a man plowing a field in the spring without wanting to shout, 'Glory hallelujah!'"

He drew out one of his ever-ready sabers and slashed viciously at the Queen Anne's lace in the fence corner. "And don't you ever go around talking to people about beauty and your soul, either. The Lord A'mighty put some soul in all of us, I reckon, but when I hear a man talking overmuch about his own allotment I know he's got either a cheesecloth spine or a missing grandfather. Probably," he concluded, replacing the saber and vanishing briskly, "the latter."

Marcy did not understand all of this oration, though she knew every word of it by heart; it was a favorite quotation of Mr. Furness the druggist, who employed the aesthetic Noble Q. Harrison

to serve the community with Neapolitan ice cream and Dr. Pepper. It had even inspired her, on one occasion, to try her own hand at a poem:

Winter's Gift

*Roses bloom in Summer,
Violets come in Spring,
Yellow leaves in Autumn;
What does Winter bring?*

*Winter brings the snowflakes,
Falling from the sky;
No one else in Winter
Is happier than I.*

But Aunty, on being shown the poem, had been moderate in her praise. "It's not bad, considering. The meter and the rhyme are good—in fact, perfect. But it takes more than meter and rhyme to make a poem. Besides, you know very well you don't like winter, Marcy."

Marcy was somewhat crestfallen, and for the first time in her life she was disposed to question Aunty's judgment, for (although she prudently kept this to herself) she had shown the poem to her teacher at school, who had called it "wonderful." This seemed to Marcy the more reasonable and accurate view.

Yet Aunty, who knew everything, thought not; and she could not ask Grandpa, since his answering pronouncements, except in cases of the most rudimentary deduction, were necessarily confined to subjects he had pronounced upon in life. Marcy sighed and relinquished creative effort for the time being.

SHE HAD nearly forgotten the poem when Auntie spoke of it again, several weeks after her recovery from the measles. "Have you tried any more poems yet, Marcy?"

Marcy shook her head moodily. The very word "poem" was reminiscently offensive to her just now. She had taken part, the evening before, in an elaborate Sunday-school "entertainment" under the direction of the energetic Mrs. Jolly Hunt, and that had happened to her which was to curdle her blood for months to come every time she remembered it.

The entertainment consisted of three parts: a Tom Thumb wedding, a brief program of songs and recitations, and a series of tableaux in picturesque if inaccurate costume. Marcy was cast as one of the bridesmaids in the Tom Thumb wedding, had a short poem to recite in the middle part of the program, and was scheduled to participate in three of the tableaux.

But the evening went wrong from the start. The trouble began when Mrs. Jolly Hunt, catching sight of the superb round bouquet of white and pastel garden flowers Auntie had made up for Marcy to carry as bridesmaid, promptly confiscated it for the bride, giving Marcy in exchange a half-handful of bruised orange-colored nasturtiums. It thickened when Marcy came forward to recite her poem, for Mrs. Hunt chose that moment to advance to the front of the platform and busy herself with an obstinate foot-light, distracting both Marcy and her audience to the total demo-

lition of the recitation's effect. Marcy had her share, and perhaps a little more than her share, of human vanity, and she was not pleased.

The real outrage, however, occurred at the very end of the evening. The last of the planned tableaux had been given, to the accompaniment of many a rapturous "oh" and "ah" from the audience, when the demoniac woman was seized with a final and fatal inspiration. Grasping the astounded Marcy as she stood in the anteroom still seething from head to foot with resentment, repressed lamentations, and hurt feelings, she began without any explanation whatever to strip her clothes from her. "Sh!" was her sole reply to Marcy's frantic protests. Having got the child undressed to her vest and drawers, she produced from some private hell of her own a long white ruffled nightgown, flung it over Marcy's head, snatched off the child's shoes and stockings, tied a large ruffled white dimity nightcap on her head, thrust a candlestick with a lighted candle into her hand, pushed her forcibly out into the middle of the stage, and caused a red floodlight to be turned upon her.

This impromptu finale was a tumultuous success. Marcy's bewildered astonishment was obvious to the dullest, and the audience rocked and roared with incontinent glee. Marcy, whose self-esteem curled like a scorched leaf before the faintest blast of ridicule, turned first scarlet and then white. She could not run from the stage; she was too nearly palsied. She could not hide; there was nothing to hide behind. She would not cry, for even in that stricken moment she knew that her tears would be greeted by the clapping, shrieking, stamping audience with answering tears of pure hilarious ecstasy—and she a Crittenden! She could only stand there helpless, as another and another red flare descended upon her at the behest of Mrs. Jolly Hunt; and when the curtain finally fell she continued to stand there helpless, the candlestick slanting in her hand.

The candle, which had been but a stub to begin with, was gut-

tering now, and as Mrs. Hunt advanced upon her, smiling the smile of the victorious entrepreneur, to help her back into her own clothes, she shrank away so violently as to fling a drop of melted hot wax on her bare wrist. This was the last straw. When Dr. Trumbull, who had accompanied her and Diane to the entertainment, came to take her home she collapsed against his quickly extended arm, sobbing aloud with rage, humiliation and despair.

He comforted her as best he could, taking both children to the drugstore for Dr. Pepper to finish off the evening. But Marcy could not taste her Dr. Pepper or respond to his consolations. She felt that she would never be able to look him in the face again, or anybody else in town, for that matter; the only course Mrs. Hunt had left her was to go out alone into the woods and live, like the persecuted princesses in the fairy books, on roots and berries. She felt a dull, deep, aching resentment even toward Aunt, who never went with her on these occasions to protect her against indignity as the other children's mothers protected them.

She was in no favorable mood, therefore, to hear Aunt speak of anything or to hear anyone speak of poems. But curiosity died hard. "Why?" she mumbled grudgingly, after a prolonged silence.

Miss Cynthia looked up. "Why what?"

"Why did you say have I tried any more"—Marcy gulped—"any more poems?"

"Oh. Oh, I just wondered. It doesn't make any difference." Miss Crittenden knitted her fine dark brows. "There are one or two things I want to read to you sometime soon. While I still can," she added with some grimness to herself.

Marcy gave her no encouragement. Her sense of personal dignity, already so ruthlessly invaded and piteously gashed, would not permit her to unbend to Aunt yet; Aunt had had no business to let Mrs. Hunt take her flowers away from her, or ruin her recitation, or take off her clothes and push her out on a stage barefooted for everybody in town to laugh at!

But Cynthia's final words, returning to mind a moment later, were ominous. "While I still can." What did that mean? Aunt's conversation with Dr. Trumbull in the parlor while she lay upstairs heavy with sleep and measles recurred now, clearly: "This'll be the end, I tell you" . . . "been a long time since there was anything to justify my existence." Terror, the more poignant for its vagueness, seized upon Marcy. Had Aunt meant—

Mrs. Crittenden, on her way down the hall to the kitchen, suddenly paused and looked out the window. "Here comes Jay up the walk," she said. "He looks hot, poor boy. Come in and get cool, Jay." She opened the screen door for him.

Crittenden entered. "Morn', Ma." He sat down in a wide wicker chair and mopped his perspiring bald head with a vast white linen handkerchief. "Morn', Cynthia. Marcy." He put the handkerchief away and leaned back, feeling in his pocket for a cigar and trying to appear at ease.

"Came by Mrs. Peake's," he observed with an attempt at casualness. "Says Marcy c'n come spend day, two-three days you like."

Marcy, about to protest vehemently, was halted by the altered expressions on both women's faces. "Jay. What's the matter?" Mrs. Crittenden breathed.

"Nothin' matter. Child's grandmother, ain't she?" He drummed sharply on the arm of his chair. "Got talk Cynthia," he admitted at last.

Cynthia smiled acidly. "If that's all, and it's what I think it is, you can spare yourself the trouble. Trumbull's been here twice about it already."

"That so?" Jay was manifestly relieved. "What'd you tell him?"

"Just what I've told you. That he could spare himself the trouble." Cynthia picked up the gingham frock she was making for Marcy and adjusted it for basting.

There was a silence of some duration. Finally Crittenden broke it. "Nothin' gained bein' bullheaded about it," he offered heavily.

His sister did not reply.

Mrs. Crittenden was showing unmistakable signs of agitation. "You listen to Jay, Daught," she pleaded. "He wants to help you. And he can help you. Jay's smart. He wants to help you do what's best. You listen to him."

Cynthia paid no attention to her. "I told Trumbull," she said in measured tones to her brother, "that it was all the same to me what he could or couldn't do. I went through enough torture the other two times, trying to please him and the rest of you. I'll not go through it again."

Crittenden looked at her. "D'know what else you can do this time."

"Don't you?" Cynthia smiled.

Mrs. Crittenden uttered a small smothered cry. "Daught, Daught——"

Cynthia put her sewing aside and rose. "Come, Marcy. Your Grandmother Peake wants you to come over for a little visit. I'll get your things ready and clean you up." She spoke calmly, without raising her voice, but Marcy, bitterly reluctant as she was, did not dare protest. Her aunt's eyes burned like live black coals, and the white area about her lips had deepened. Marcy followed disconsolately upstairs and waited in dumb submission while Cynthia packed two fresh dresses, two changes of underclothing, and the necessary toilet articles. "How long do I have to stay?" she ventured to ask as her hair was being brushed.

"Not long. Maybe not longer than tomorrow morning. Uncle Jay'll stop by and tell you." Suddenly, with an impulse exceedingly rare, she held Marcy close in both arms and kissed her. "You love your Aunt, don't you, honey?"

Marcy nodded shyly, her cheek pressed against her aunt's shoulder.

"And Aunt loves you," Cynthia told her passionately. "If it hadn't been for you, Aunt would have fallen all to pieces long ago. No, never mind. You'll understand someday. Be a good girl now and run along to Mrs. Peake's. Maybe," she suggested in an

attempt to lighten the child's troubled spirits, "maybe she'll teach you how to make bread if you ask her to. Or maybe," Cynthia laughed shortly, "even if you don't."

Marcy looked up, surprised. "Can I, if she does?"

Cynthia laughed again. "Dear me, Marcy, I'm not such an ogre as'all that! Of course you can if you want to. It's not a crime to make bread. I just want you to remember that it isn't a world-shaking achievement, either; that's all. Now, run along. You'll be back home in no time."

Marcy trudged dispiritedly toward the stairway. Cynthia came after her, stopped her, tipped up her chin for a long look into her eyes, and kissed her again, gently. "Poor child," she said.

—14—

THIS TURNED out to be the first of many such dismissals, with Jay Crittenden arriving for conference at unexpected hours and Cynthia packing Marcy summarily off to her Grandmother Peake's. The departures were not always softened, either, by amused or tender words and gestures at the final moment. Much oftener Auntie was taut-lipped and silent, and sometimes she spoke to her little niece with cutting abruptness. On one occasion, in fact, when Marcy gathered courage to point out that the Fourth of July would be included in the time she spent from home, Cynthia answered her so sharply as to discourage all further protest. "Don't be such a baby, Marcy!" she exclaimed in a tone of violent exasperation. "Mrs. Peake always goes to the picnic. What difference does it make whether you go with her or with Ma?"

Ordinarily Marcy would have explained that it was not the picnic that bothered her. Comparatively speaking, she cared little about the picnic, although she took a normal pleasure in the band

music, the steam swing, the spun sugar "cotton candy" on a stick, unobtainable at any other time, and especially the five-mile ride on the rickety little local train to and from the banks of the nearest river. She liked, too, the souvenirs she brought home—the ribbon-trimmed canes and whips, the enormous circular folding fans of red, white, and blue tissue paper. But it was the aftermath she would miss; coming home, tired and sated with diversion, to sandwiches and lemonade and stories with Auntie on the porch in the evening, while crackers boomed and Roman candles blossomed and the great rockets burst overhead. She knew it would not be like that at Grandmother Peake's. Grandmother Peake would be bustling hither and yon, flinging cupboard doors open and shut, putting the house in order in her usual workmanlike fashion, and by the time she had finished Marcy would be overcome with sleep and the evening completely spoiled.

Cynthia's manner, however, effectually quelled her protests. At the picnic, wandering from place to place with Inez Colton, she looked everywhere for Grandma, but apparently Grandma had not come. Marcy had never known her to miss the Fourth of July picnic; what was going on at home?

It was a trying situation to everyone concerned. Marcy's visits to Mrs. Peake never lasted long enough for her to take up the rhythm of the Peake household, and she spent the days like an exile, moping about after her busy grandmother or sitting upstairs alone in moody reverie. Mrs. Peake's repeated proddings about her exclusiveness, her lack of desire to "get out and do things like the other girls," had no effect, coming as they did only during these disconnected intervals, except to intensify her longing for Auntie and home.

Mrs. Peake, on the other hand, knowing that the child was in her house for two or three days at most, forbore to institute any of the reforms she felt to be so sorely needed. To a woman of her executive temperament this was a tremendous irritation and strain, and it resulted in her eying Marcy from time to time with

such grim disapproval that the child shrank from her in visible dismay.

Godfrey made no bones of the fact that he was exceedingly put out. "Tell 'em to make up their minds," he said sharply to his mother, coming home and finding Marcy again in the house, "for a day or two." "Either have her come here to stay, if you want her, or tell 'em to keep her at home. This is getting to be a damned nuisance."

Marcy flushed miserably, and Mrs. Peake—who would never have gone so far as to put her feeling into words in Marcy's presence, though she had unwittingly made it perfectly plain by other means that it was identical with Godfrey's—felt some compunction. She gave a passable imitation of sunny laughter.

"Oh, Marcy's getting to be quite a help," she said comfortingly. "She dried the dishes for me today."

Godfrey snorted.

Nor were these enforced excursions from home the only disturbing elements that had cropped up lately. Life was coming unhinged in a dozen places. Marcy, temporarily in the safe harbor of the Crittenden garden, saw Pansy waddling past one Monday morning and, supposing that she was coming to attend to the Crittenden laundry, skipped around to the garden gate to meet her. But Pansy did not turn at the corner. Marcy, surprised, called to her: "Pansy! Aren't you coming in to do the washing?"

She ran across the garden to the front wall and peered inquiringly out at the embarrassed Pansy, who set down a heavy basket she carried and smiled nervously.

"Howdy, Miss Marcy. No, ma'am, I ain' comin' in today; Mis' Wilson want me. Yo' grammaw, she tole me not come till she sen' wud." Pansy hesitated. "Reckon yo' folks hab kine o' hahd times ri' now, honey."

Marcy looked blank; she could not remember when Pansy had not done the washing and most of the ironing. She went thought-

fully around to the back of the house, and her eyes widened with amazement; Grandma—*Grandma!*—was fixing to do the washing! She had moved Pansy's tubs from the bench under the maple tree to an open space in the storeroom outhouse, where they were well out of sight, and she was shaving the yellow laundry soap Pansy used into the open boiler on the little stove. "Grandma!" Marcy exclaimed, shocked.

Mrs. Crittenden jumped guiltily, then relaxed. "Oh, it's you, honey-pie." She smiled, though a little round spot of color had sprung into each of her cheeks. "How is Grandma's baby this beautiful morning?"

Grandma's baby was all too plainly perturbed. "What are you doing that for, Grandma?" she asked disapprovingly.

Mrs. Crittenden glanced apprehensively toward the house. "Hush, honey. Grandma wants to get as much done as she can before——"

But it was a dying hope. The back screen opened, and Cynthia, finishing the braiding of her long brown hair, appeared in the doorway. "So that's what you're up to," she remarked dryly. "I thought as much. Where are you going to hang it, Ma? Pansy and the Wilsons would have a better view from the orchard side, but if you want to give Mit Henley a treat I'd suggest the back garden."

Mrs. Crittenden winced. "I thought if you'd help me put up a few lines, Daught, I might hang it in the house. It's so hot everything would get dry in there without any trouble. Nobody'll see us carry it in if we're careful."

"Nobody but the whole town," Cynthia agreed acidly. But she took a heavy coil of clothesline and went back into the house.

Marcy, following her, was half frightened at the repressed fury with which she worked, driving great nails ruthlessly into the wallpaper and even into the wood paneling, stretching the network of white lines the length of the house, from kitchen door to dining room to library to parlor. "There!" she muttered as the

last length was knotted in place. She turned and saw Marcy. "Like it?" She smiled. "That's the first installment on your Uncle Jay's extra week in St. Louis. You'll notice the second one at dinner-time."

"Aunt—" Marcy, feeling like one sinking into a slough, involuntarily put out a helpless hand.

Cynthia responded at once. "Never mind, honey. I'm just mad because Ma thinks she has to do the washing. We could have put it off until Jay got home. Don't you want to go over and play with Inez?"

Marcy shook her head. "Could you—could you read to me, Aunt?" This was sure comfort in any situation.

"Not this morning. I'll have to go out and help Ma if she'll let me. Why don't you go read to yourself? You never did read *Little Women*, did you?"

"No." Marcy had been discouraged by the outward appearance of *Little Women*, a chunky small volume bound in an unappetizing shade of brown.

But desperate diseases require desperate remedies. She trudged into the library and took the book down from the shelf, curling herself gloomily into one of the great leather chairs and opening it without interest. Everybody, she felt, was pushing her aside. She was in Grandmother Peake's way; Godfrey hated her; Grandma had no time for her; Aunt would not read; Reine, lethargic or somnolent in the deep shade on the front porch, would take no notice of her tentative calls and inexpert whistlings. The Major would not appear; he had been pretty consistently reticent of late, laying himself wide open to the suspicion that he was but a fair-weather friend after all. And even Pansy—

Marcy swallowed against a lump in her throat as she thought of Pansy washing for the Wilsons, telling her wondrous yarns to spiteful little Christine Wilson instead of to her. It was a good thing there was no school; Christine's taunts would be unbearable. Marcy burned with discomfiture at sight of the network of

clotheslines over her head. Who ever heard of hanging up the washing in the house?

Nothing could be done, apparently. There was no help for any of it. She turned dismally to the opening chapter of *Little Women* and forced her attention upon it.

—15—

BUT *Little Women* was a surprise. "This is the best book I ever read, Auntie," she announced delightedly as the two women, moist and panting from the heat and the unaccustomed labor, came carrying in the discreetly covered bundles of damp clothing and linen.

Miss Crittenden's face was pale with heat and fury, but she vouchsafed a curt nod. "I told you you'd like it."

Marcy looked once at the first row of dangling clothes on the line and hastily glanced away. It was terrible. It was even worse than she had expected. It looked like the Faulkners' house down by the dump. Suppose somebody should come! What would they do? They couldn't get all those things down in time. Suppose Grandmother Peake should take a notion to come over! Marcy could hear her rich, amused chuckle as she told Godfrey about it in the evening. "Let us keep up appearances or die. . . ."

Marcy, torn between the two opposing philosophies, felt herself confounded. She knew intuitively that to Grandmother Peake the disgrace would lie not in doing the washing but in being ashamed of it; and yet Grandmother Peake would take a perverse and inconsistent pleasure in the fact that Auntie and Grandma had had to do it. She would think it a "come-down" for the high and mighty Crittendens. "Whoptydoodledo!" she might even add.

There seemed nobody to blame but Grandpa. Marcy looked accusingly up at his portrait over the mantel, which colored, cleared its throat pompously, and looked the other way.

These thoughts were quite intolerable, and Marcy, not very hopefully hoping for the best, returned to her book and was soon mercifully oblivious. The summons to the midday meal took her unawares, for the morning, beguiled by Amy March's mishap with the pickled limes, had flown on lightning wings. What were pickled limes like, she wondered. She had never seen any.

But at sight of the dinner table she forgot them. "Fried chicken!" she exclaimed greedily. "Have you got cream gravy, Grandma?"

Mrs. Crittenden smiled at her. "Lots of cream gravy, honey-pie. Let Grandma give you a hot biscuit to put it on."

"Yes, do, Marcy," Miss Cynthia put in sardonically. "Let Grandma give you several hot biscuits to put it on. Eat, drink, and be merry today, for if you get any gravy tomorrow you'll have to eat it out of a spoon. And the next day——"

"Daught!" implored Mrs. Crittenden, her chin trembling. "There's no use in burdening the child with it all, is there?" She put two split hot biscuits on Marcy's plate and covered them with the rich gravy. "Have some chicken, honey. Let Grandma find you a drumstick."

Marcy looked from her grandmother to her aunt. She saw now what Aunty had meant by "the second installment" on Uncle Jay's "extra week in St. Louis." There was nothing on the table but the chicken and biscuits and gravy.

Surely, though, this was a small matter for Aunty to be so annoyed about. The food was less abundant than usual, but it was delicious. Marcy was more than content. She did not care for vegetables, and she could do well enough without dessert for once.

But it seemed that Aunty's rage had been that of the true prophetess. That evening they ate the rest of the chicken and biscuits and gravy, and the next day's noon meal consisted of

chicken and biscuits. On the third day the biscuits disappeared, and on the fourth day the chicken was baked instead of fried, there being no flour left to roll it in and no shortening in which to fry it.

"Chicken, as I live and breathe!" Miss Cynthia remarked airily as she took her place at the table. "Why don't we have this oftener, Ma? How many chickens have you got left, by the way?"

Mrs. Crittenden's soft brown eyes filled with tears. She loved her pretty flock. Her motherly solicitude for "my chickens" was second only to her concern for Marcy and Jay and Cynthia. Her delight in each new generation of fluffy, squealing chicks, her proprietary pride in the "old dominicker hen" or the "old Rhode Island Red" who was "anxious to set," were integral parts of her personality. As far back as Marcy could remember, Grandma had stood thrice daily in her white sunbonnet in the back garden, calling her cheeping and squawking pensioners around her, scattering the crimson and yellow corn among them, talking to them as though they were so many babbling children home from school. She talked to her flowers in the same way. "You don't feel good in here with all these great big old tiger lilies, do you, honey?" she would inquire of a clump of pining bluebells. "Well, you just hold your horses till tomorrow morning, and I'll come put you over there by the well, where it's nice and cool."

She did not answer Cynthia's taunt, but bowed her head briefly and reverently over the unadorned chicken on her plate. "I think maybe Jay'll be home today," she said at length, trying to speak cheerfully.

"God just told you, I suppose," Cynthia retorted. "You might find out, while you're about it, whether he'll get home drunk or sober."

Mrs. Crittenden half rose from her chair, her lips quivering. "Oh, sit down, Ma!" Cynthia cried impatiently. "You ought to be used to me by this time. Eat your chicken, Marcy."

"Can I put some more salt on it?" Marcy asked timidly.

Miss Cynthia was about to respond in her former vein, but she controlled the impulse and inverted the salt shaker over Marcy's plate. "There's none left, I'm afraid." She replaced the shaker and looked at her mother. "If Jay *doesn't* get home today there'll be the devil to pay," she observed quietly but with meaning.

Mrs. Crittenden paled to the lips. "Are you out of your medicine, Daught?"

"No. But I will be by night."

Her mother's lips moved silently. At last she ventured: "Daught, I know Mr. Furness would be glad to——"

Cynthia stopped her. "I haven't sunk that low yet, Ma, and I'll be much obliged if you'll never suggest such a thing again. I'll not go begging Fred Furness for credit; I've told you that before. I may go over to Jay's myself tonight after dark and see if he's got home yet—that is, if I can find anything to wear that isn't in rags." She looked disparagingly at the sagging lines of clothes. "Even Marcy's things are going to pieces." She rose and felt a linen dress of her own that hung near the table. "This is dry enough now to iron, and maybe I can patch it up somehow this afternoon."

"Pansy says nobody that is anybody mends their clothes," Marcy volunteered. "She says a hole is an accident but a patch is a disgrace."

"The eternal patrician," Miss Cynthia murmured. "I used to feel that way myself, Marcy, but I'm scarcely in Pansy's class any more."

"Daught!" Mrs. Crittenden's withered cheeks flushed perceptibly.

To their surprise Cynthia laughed with entire good humor. "All right, Ma; I won't torment you any more. Marcy, do you want to go with me over to Uncle Jay's tonight?"

Marcy nodded eagerly. That Auntie should go over to Uncle Jay's or anywhere else, except on Christmas Eve to consult Santa Claus, was a circumstance novel enough to command her interest.

Cynthia was in a strange mood. That afternoon, as she sat in the

shadow of the wistaria vines on the front porch, cobbling the outworn linen dress into a semblance of decency, she entertained her little niece with a long succession of anecdotes, reminiscences, epigrams, quotations, and needle stabs of cynical philosophy; Marcy, enchanted, could not leave her side. The mere rapidity, vivacity, and variation of Miss Crittenden's comments would in fact have held a much more exacting audience. As a rule she was taciturn, going through hours of her daily routine without an unnecessary word to anyone, but when she talked freely, as she did now, Marcy would have waded through fire and brimstone to listen to her. Nobody else talked like Auntie; nobody knew such poems; nobody told such stories.

"There!" Cynthia said at last, holding up the dress for inspection. "Do you think it'll hang together long enough to get over to Jay's and back?" She shook it out gently and looked over it at Marcy. "Marcy, did you have enough to eat at dinner? You're not hungry, are you?"

Marcy shook her head. "I had plenty. Why?"

"Well, it wasn't exactly a Lucullan banquet." Cynthia's eyes grew remote and reflective. "I'll tell you where there's a feast, Marcy—in *The Eve of St. Agnes*. How do you like this?" She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, reciting the rich syllables with sensuous appreciation:

. . . a heap
Of candied apple, quince and plum and gourd,
With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;
Manna and dates, in argosy transferred
From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,
From silken Samarkand to cedared Lebanon.

"Is that all of it?" Marcy demanded as she paused.

"All of the poem? No, it's a long poem."

"Read it to me!" Marcy urged.

"Some other time." Cynthia's voice was suddenly weary. "I

couldn't stand it now." She looked dubiously at the shabby dress on her lap, and then, with a resigned gesture, rose to hang it away until evening.

Marcy went back to *Little Women*. She had already read it twice and was on her third trip through. She was dizzy with envy of the March girls, who had such a good time in the midst of their troubles. There were the Peppers, too, living their precarious but affectionate and exciting family life in the spick-and-span shelter of their little brown house; it must be lovely, Marcy thought wistfully, to be poor!

Uncle Jay had got home indeed, but, according to Aunt Lora, he was not available for conference. "You can go up if you want to," she conceded, casting an appraising eye over Cynthia's mended dress, outmoded hat, and scrupulous gloves. "But I wish you joy of anything you get out of him tonight."

Cynthia's manner toward her sister-in-law was always somewhat stiff. It now became rigid. "I'll see him, anyway, I think. If you don't mind," she added icily, turning toward the stairs.

Lora Crittenden sniffed and stood aside. Marcy looked at her with hatred. "Lora Jackson," she said to herself, in Aunt's cadence. Her gaze followed Aunt's tall figure and her carefully coiled brown braid out of sight and then fell to the toes of her own slippers. She did not want to talk with Aunt Lora.

Lora, however, was in a badgering mood. In spite of herself she stood in some awe of Cynthia, but Marcy was fair game. "What's the matter now? Need some new five-dollar patent-leather shoes with tassels on them?"

Marcy did not reply. Her chest was beginning to heave, and it took all her attention to maintain her self-control. She would not give Aunt Lora the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

One or two further digs having failed to provoke any audible response from the child, Mrs. Jay gave over her efforts, shrugged, and affected to read a magazine. In a few moments Cynthia came back downstairs. She was very pale, but she was putting something

into her purse, and Marcy sighed with relief. Lora sniffed again, loudly.

Aunt and niece started silently for home. Not a word was spoken between them; the only sound was the sound of their footsteps grinding in the gravel as they crossed the streets. No matter how often Cynthia Crittenden put forth her hand to receive her brother's bounty, she drew it back scorched. With her, years of dependence had in no wise cooled the shame of depending; every time she suffered it she felt the shock anew. Marcy, understanding, her breast aching with love for Aunt and detestation of Lora Crittenden, was gravely and sympathetically silent.

"We'll stop at the drugstore a minute," Miss Crittenden said at last. Then, suddenly, her step faltered. "Marcy, who is that? That man over there by the door, talking to Mr. Furness and Mr. Pickett? Why——"

A large pebble under her foot suddenly rolled aside, throwing her off balance, and she lurched and fell forward to the ground. The stranger, a vigorous, cheerful, prosperous-looking man of middle age, hastened forward to help her to her feet. "Not at all," he replied courteously to her indistinct words of acknowledgment. He turned to go back to the store.

Marcy looked up inquiringly. Aunt's voice did not sound natural, and her face now looked even less so. "Come, Marcy," she said huskily.

"Aren't we going to get your medicine?" Marcy glanced toward the open door as the stranger rejoined his companions, in time to see Furness and Pickett quickly alter, for his benefit, an exchanged glance of dumfounded astonishment. "Good God A'mighty!" Mr. Furness' moving lips suggested.

"No. Not now. Hurry. Hurry." Aunt took her hand and walked her rapidly out of the lighted square. Around the corner, she suddenly bent double with gasping laughter. "Aunt! What's the matter?" Marcy cried, terrified.

Cynthia lifted a hand to her brow. "Laugh, Marcy, laugh!

You've just seen the funniest thing you'll ever see in your life." Tears poured over her white cheeks. "That was Clifton Brown, Marcy. Clifton Brown! And he didn't know me." Her mouth, stretched wide in a cadaver's ivory smile, twitched faintly at the corners, and she bent forward again, as though in spasm. "He didn't *know* me, Marcy. He put his arm around me and helped me up, and he didn't know me from Adam!"

Marcy stared at her incredulously. It could not possibly be that the stout, commonplace, comfortable man who had helped Auntie to her feet was Clifton Brown, her lover of long ago. Marcy no longer defined the word "lover" exclusively in terms of fairy-tale princes in velvet and lace; but, remembering the photograph of Clifton Brown in his youth, she still could not believe that this was he.

Her heart, nevertheless, was heavy with love and compassion. The depth of her emotion emboldened her to slip her warm little hand into Cynthia's cold and nerveless one as they walked along. Cynthia's hand closed around her fingers, but there was no answering pressure. She did not speak again.

Marcy, put to bed immediately on their arrival home, puzzled over the revelation, uneasy and troubled with the weight of what it implied. As long as Mr. Brown had remained a legend, as long as she had thought of him as one thinks of a man in a dream, she had felt no antipathy toward him, but now it was different. His very solidity and actuality seemed insulting, not only to Auntie in her tragic loneliness but to Marcy herself. If Auntie had married this man she might have had children of her own, and what then would have become of Marcy? Yet Auntie had wanted to marry him. Perhaps she had even wanted to have those other children.

The lump in Marcy's throat swelled with pain and conflict. It was her first experience of jealousy, and bitter enough she found it. She took no account of the fact that all this had happened years before her birth, when Auntie could not possibly have

known that her little niece would be orphaned and in need of her. If Grandpa had not stopped Aunty from marrying Clifton Brown—

But, on the other hand, Aunty had *wanted* to marry Mr. Brown.

Marcy tossed and turned in her bed. Maybe Aunty still wished she could have married him. There was that visit to old Tom Tolliver, and what Aunty had told her out of Shakespeare about men dying and worms eating them, but not for love. What did Mr. Brown mean by treating Aunty that way? He had even married another person; he had even had children—"quite a family," Tolliver had said. Poor Aunty!

Yet the awful possibility that she, Marcy, was not first in Aunty's heart was like a blow in the face; she could not even entertain the thought. In desperation she tried to summon the Major, and just before she fell into an exhausted sleep she did see him standing at the foot of the bed, his arm hooked over the post in the familiar way and a thoughtful scowl on his face. But he did not speak. He looked at her as though about to tell her something, then shook his head and vanished.

In the middle of the night Marcy awakened to the realization that Aunty was not in bed beside her. The child's body was too completely relaxed to answer her mind's impulse to get up and look down the stairway; but she was dimly conscious that someone down there was pacing the floor—ceaselessly, slowly, steadily up and down. The click of Reine's nails on the floor told her that the old dog, as usual, was sharing the midnight vigil, and by this she knew that it was Aunty.

She drifted slowly back to sleep. But it was only a few minutes later, it seemed, when Aunty was beside her, standing at the edge of the bed and shaking her gently. "Wake up, Marcy. I want you to go to the drugstore for me first thing, as soon as it's open. Here, sit up, and I'll put on your shoes and stockings."

Marcy rubbed her eyes, yawned, and looked at Aunty. Aunty's

face was like water-softened chalk. Deep lines were engraved about her mouth, and there was a pinched look to her whole countenance, as though she were in torment. "To get your medicine, Aunty?" Marcy asked.

Miss Crittenden nodded. "Go right now, before breakfast, Marcy. I think Mr. Furness'll be there. If he's not, wait for him. And hurry back. Whatever you do, don't stop to look for Inez. Don't stop for anything." Her hands and lips trembled as she helped Marcy on with her clothing and hurriedly brushed the long curls over her finger. "Never mind a ribbon. Hurry."

Mr. Furness was there, just opening the front door of his shop in a flood of hot early sunshine.

"Good morning, Miss Crittenden!" he greeted her amiably. "Well, you're a sure-nough early bird this morning, aren't you? What can I do for you? But I reckon I know." He went behind the counter and took down, from a red-labeled row on a back shelf, a new bottle of Aunty's medicine. "This it?"

Marcy nodded. "I have to hurry."

"Have to hurry, do you? All right, ma'am. Dollar and a quarter. That's right." He peered compassionately after her over his glasses as she left the store.

Marcy sped home as fast as her plump little legs would carry her. Inez called to her as she passed, but she dared not do more than wave in reply, though her heart was torn by the sounds of instant fury and eternal repudiation that resulted.

Cynthia met her at the front door, Reine padding close behind her. "Did you get it?" she asked, her ashen face a mask of suspense.

Marcy, breathless, held out the bottle. Cynthia tore the paper away, took out the cork, and put two of the white cubes into her mouth. Her face was almost instantly calmer, and the deep lines relaxed about her mouth. "You'll have to go back and get something for breakfast, Marcy; there's nothing in the house. You needn't hurry so this time, though; stop a minute and get your

breath, child. Here's the order. Bring back the things Ma's marked and have them send the rest." She put the note and the money into Marcy's hand. "Take Reine with you. She's sluggish and I can't get her to stir herself as long as she's at home."

Mrs. Crittenden, coming out to water her flowers, looked critically at Reine. She had moments of violent dislike for the dog. "Reine's getting old, that's what's the matter with her," she suggested injudiciously. "It would be nothing but a mercy to her if we had her put out of her misery."

Cynthia whirled upon her. "If ever you let me catch you doing a thing like that——"

Mrs. Crittenden started back in dismay. "Daught, what's the matter with you? You know I wouldn't do anything to Reine without your knowing it."

"You'd better not." Cynthia breathed hard. "You'd better not. I can tell you right now you'd better not." She turned and went into the house, snapping the screen door hard.

Marcy called Reine and started down the walk again, feeling as though her tumultuous little inside had been stirred up with a stick. Mrs. Crittenden's suggestion had been scarcely less of a shock to her than to Cynthia herself; Reine was older than Marcy, and the child could not imagine life without her. All the way back to "town," as she went circuitously several blocks out of her way to escape encountering Inez' temper, she kept patting and stroking the old dog's back in hurt affection. Grandma had better not! A knob of emotion gathered in her throat as she recalled Auntie's reminiscences of the dear fat, clumsy puppy Reine had been, with her great worshiping eyes and her absurd flopping paws. Reine was fat again now, she was much too big for her paws, and her devoted eyes were somewhat dimmed; but Marcy hugged her to her side in a passion of protective anger. What did Grandma mean!

The Major fell into step by her side. "Jeanie never did under-

stand dogs," he contributed in palliation. "She never had to. A woman like Jeanie doesn't have to understand anything. She's too damned near perfect just the way she is."

Marcy was unresponsive. She could not have put her finger on the reason, but her encounters with Grandpa had been less and less satisfying of late. Grandpa was wonderful when all was going well, but he seemed to have serious lacks as a shelter in the time of storm.

The Major, perhaps sensing her dissatisfaction with him, showed signs of uneasiness. "See they've about got their tabernacle built," he remarked with an effort toward casual ease. He swished a saber in the direction of Mason's woodlot. "Couple more days they'll all be tearing their shirts off to get away before the devil grabs 'em by the tails; and couple months later they'll be shivering in the cold, waiting for the devil to come and touch 'em up so they can get back to living. And he'll be along, of course. You can't wear out the devil." He watched her face anxiously for signs of returning interest. "The devil, Marcy, is the one that invented patience. Talk about Job! Job wasn't a patch on the devil. Why, I've known that old bastard to—oh, sorry." He checked himself and peered down apologetically at Marcy, whose countenance was now indignant as well as unsympathetic. He put his saber back into its sheath; cleared his throat; ran a finger around the inside of his collar. "Well," he said uncertainly, "see you at the revival." He nodded hastily and vanished.

It was the gradual waning of Grandpa's influence, perhaps, that finally resolved the conflict in Marcy's mind between her desire to "go forward" at the revival and her deep-lying dread of his and Cynthia's scorn. At all events, as Mrs. Peake had predicted, she had her first experience of mass salvation that summer. It was an experience pregnant with more than spiritual uplift—as even Marcy might have known it would be, with Mrs. Jolly Hunt promoting it. Mrs. Hunt had been most active among the little girls

of her Sunday-school class, promising them untold delights in the way of prizes, picnics, and general preferments if they would but go forward for prayer at the revival and make a good "class showing."

These temptations were not without their lure for Marcy, who had always been secretly greedy for distinction, and there were many other magnets as well. The revival preacher was passionate indeed, and the revival itself was described on all sides as the most "fruitful of precious souls" the town had ever known. Marcy had been agog from the earliest meeting, finding it nearly impossible to withstand Mrs. Crittenden's gently urgent pressures on her shoulder each time the call was given. Moreover, one deterrent of last summer was no longer in force; many children of Marcy's age were going forward this year. She would not be alone.

It was on a very hot evening—an evening so hot that Mrs. Crittenden had stayed at home and Marcy had come with the Coltons—that she finally took the plunge. The congregation swayed and rocked in the heat; the hoarse exhortations of the evangelist, broken at intervals by bursts of yearning song from the huge community choir, filled Marcy's breast with a strange ecstasy. O blessed Saviour, O spotless Lamb of God! "He died for you, my child, my little one!" cried out the prophet, pointing; and Marcy, quivering in response from head to foot, got to her feet and stumbled toward the altar.

Inez promptly accompanied her, though obviously with the sole intention of not missing anything. Mrs. Colton burst into gratuitous tears of joy and rose to follow Inez to the mourners' bench, sinking to her knees with her head in her little daughter's lap. Marcy, seeing this, felt a stab of surprise and pain; this was something she had not reckoned upon. She stole a glance about her. Other mothers, too, were following their children, kneeling at their feet to pray for them.

Marcy's heart swelled once more with the anguish of the publicly deserted. In a crisis like this Auntie always failed her, always. The voices of the choir rose in a soft wail:

*Just as I am, without one plea
Save that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!*

Tears of humiliation poured down Marcy's face; she was the only child who sat alone. If Grandma had been there she would not have lacked support of a kind, she knew. But Grandma was not there.

Grandpa, on the contrary, was. She could see him leering at her from a far corner of the tabernacle. "Serves you right," he nodded. "Warned you, didn't I? Needn't come whining to me." He looked away from her, flicked a speck of dust from his shoulder, and concentrated upon the sweating, shouting preacher a gaze of ineffable contempt.

Marcy sobbed below her breath. How long would it be before the preacher came down to speak to the mourners, and she could let him shake her hand and go home? Her religious ecstasy was all gone now; she neither knew nor cared any longer whether she were beloved of the Saviour, the spotless Lamb of God. How long would this agony last? How long had she already sat there, cast out and forgotten by all the world?

Actually it was less than five minutes before Mrs. Peake saw her and, after a moment of hesitation during which bafflement, amusement, and exasperation strove for mastery of her fine open countenance, made her way gallantly forward into the breach. Marcy, feeling that warm, reassuring hand on her round little knee, cold as a clam in spite of the overpowering heat, drew a deep shivering breath of relief and abandoned herself once more to the bliss of regeneration and redemption. It was her first moment of genuine love for her Grandmother Peake.

She had hoped to find Aunty in bed when she got home, so that she might escape questioning. But Miss Cynthia was sitting alone on the front porch.

"You made it at last, I see," she remarked dryly as Marcy came near enough for her guiltily conscious face to betray her. "Much good may it do you. I'm surprised you had the spunk, when Ma wasn't there to go forward with you."

Marcy cleared her throat. "Grandmother Peake went with me."

Cynthia was genuinely amused. "No!"

Marcy nodded, and her aunt laughed aloud. But a moment later she said in a new tone, "That was nice of her. Marcy——"

Marcy waited.

Cynthia half extended her hand to draw the child to her but retracted it quickly. "Nothing. Never mind. Some other time." She rose and opened the door. "It's bedtime now."

—16—

MRS. JOLLY HUNT's interesting idea of the best way to maintain in her class of little girls the spirit of Christian amity arrived at during the protracted meeting was to set them at once in competition for a prize, the nature of which she left to their imaginations. The contest was made up of "Scripture information questions" assigned at the close of each Sunday's lesson and reported on at the next. Marcy, whose reputation for precocity in such matters as reading and research was already much too well established among them, easily outstripped them all and won by a long lead. This did not endear her to her classmates; at the end of the six weeks allotted to the competition she had scarcely a friend to her name.

But she had the prize. "I'll send it to you by mail, so you won't

have to wait till next Sunday," Mrs. Hunt said. "I had to order it from the Cape, and it hasn't come yet. But it'll be here tomorrow morning."

The package duly arrived. Marcy carried it home from the post office and unwrapped it with quivering fingers, Cynthia Crittenden watching her with lazy amusement.

"It looks like a book," she commented. "I doubt whether you'll be much edified, Marcy, by a book of Mrs. Jolly Hunt's choosing. But let's see it."

Marcy took off the last of the tissue paper, and Cynthia, seeing the title, snatched it from her as though it were deadly poison. "*Uncle Tom's Cabin!*" she cried, punctuating the words with loathing. "Has that woman dared—has that woman actually dared— Give me that paper, Marcy." She seized the tissue wrapping from Marcy's hands and quickly bound up the book again, handling it as she might have handled a venomous reptile. "That's a book we don't let come into this house, Marcy. If it hadn't been for that book we would all have been prosperous and happy today. Now you take this package"—she tied the final knot with emphasis—"and march right straight over to Mrs. Hunt's house and give it back to her, and tell her that none of that low-down, lying, hypocritical white trash's work will ever be given shelf room in this house. Thank her, of course, for her kind intention." She extended the package.

Marcy, with a stricken cry, backed away and broke into tears. This was an impossible charge. Her heart was already bursting at the loss of her cherished prize; to be asked in addition to go on such an errand, with such a message, was more than mortal flesh could bear.

Cynthia flung the book down on a chair. "You haven't the gumption of a chicken, Marcy. Why, if Pa had been here he would probably"—Cynthia's lips twitched in spite of her—"he would probably have *fed* it to her. Never mind, I'll send it back by mail, if you're so mealy-mouthed you can't carry the message.

I'll make it plain enough, even to her intelligence." She seated herself at the library desk and drew out pen and paper.

Marcy could not contain herself. "No, Aunt, no! Please! I won't read it!" She sobbed desperately. "Don't, Aunt. Don't! Don't!"

Miss Crittenden paid no heed to her. She wrote the note, folded it, and enclosed it in an envelope; but still she hesitated. At last she opened a small drawer in the desk and took out a lump of red sealing wax and a small pestle-like implement of carved and polished wood with a bronze intaglio at one end, a thing Marcy had always heard referred to as "the Crittenden seal." Cynthia lighted a match and caused a drop of melted wax to fall upon the letter to Mrs. Jolly Hunt, imprinting the Crittenden seal on the crimson mass with an unction she might not have felt had she known what, in addition to her scathing rejection of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, her hand was sealing therein.

For Marcy the day was ruined. Her mind shuddered away from the imagined scene at Mrs. Hunt's when Mr. Hunt should bring the book home from the post office. She had an evil but rescuing thought; when Aunt gave her the package to mail she would not mail it at all; she would throw it away. But Aunt had apparently foreseen this possibility, for she called a neighbor boy as he passed and entrusted him with both book and letter.

Marcy crept away, half stunned by this second catastrophe. Aunt had behaved in the most incomprehensible manner. She had used the Crittenden seal, which she always laughed at, and she had justified her spurning of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by citing the Major, whom she hated. "If Pa had been here he'd probably have fed it to her!" she had cried. Marcy did not for a moment doubt this probability, but the fierce hot pride with which Aunt had spoken of the Major astonished her beyond words. She did not so much mind the loss of the book itself; she valued it as prize, not as book, and it must indeed, she thought, be a terrible book when Aunt would not even have it in the house. But Aunt's

manner had hurt her, and she was appalled at the idea of having to go again to Sunday school and confront her teacher. And Grandma would not let her stay at home.

She was not consoled all day, though Mrs. Crittenden entertained her quilting club in the afternoon, and Marcy might follow her out to the orchard and help her serve the eight gentle-voiced old ladies, in their picturesque black silks and white embroidered aprons, with iced tea and sugar wafers. The bright-patterned quilt, stretched on its wide frame in the shade of the heavily fruited orchard trees, was flecked here and there with moving scraps of sunshine; great black and purple butterflies were abroad, now fluttering from twig to weed top, now clinging to a fallen red plum split open in the tall grass. The scent of fruit was heavy on the air. There was an opulence about the scene, an impression of final, fatalistic, and exaggerated beauty, as though this parting glimpse of tranquil life were vouchsafed purposely to comfort, in the few moments of his ultimate despair, some hapless traveler nearing a black cliff.

Yet Cynthia, that most unfortunate of wayfarers, saw nothing of it all. She would seldom appear before guests on any occasion, and she had not joined her mother's companions even to greet them. Marcy knew that she had made the wafers, thin and scalloped and sparkling with crystals of sugar; she had broken the ice and sliced the lemons and brewed the tea that brimmed the frosty pitcher. But now, alone and silent, she would be sitting over *Huckleberry Finn* or *Adonais* upstairs in the south bedroom, with Reine asleep beside her and half hidden in the folds of her shabby skirts; or she would be pacing the floor in a frenzy of impatience for the visitors' departure.

No matter what she had against Aunty, Marcy could never be comfortable while Aunty was not. She had an inspiration; she would go in and get the Oriental glass chimes to hang on the peach tree and tinkle for the party, and that would give her a

chance to see what Auntie was doing. She slipped away and stole into the house and up the stairs.

Miss Cynthia, seated at a small table in the south bedroom, laid down a pair of scissors to cover a small heap of oblong bits of paper. "What do you want, Marcy?" she inquired with some impatience. She closed a magazine from which a large square coupon had been cut and laid it on top of the scissors. "Don't bother me now; I'm busy."

Marcy explained about the chimes.

"Well, you know where they are. Don't break them. And stay out in the fresh air, Marcy. Ma may need you, anyway."

There was nothing to do but go back downstairs. Marcy went into the upstairs front hall and took the chimes carefully down. What had Auntie been cutting out coupons for? Was she sending for something for Marcy? It must be so, for Auntie never bought anything for herself except her medicine.

The thought of a possible pleasant surprise comforted her a little for the disaster to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, enabling her to get through the rest of the afternoon not too miserably. But when the day was over and she lay upstairs alone in the south bedroom, trying to go to sleep, all her woe returned sevenfold. She began to cry quietly.

Nobody heard her. Uncle Jay had come, and they were talking downstairs again. They always said the same things. Anyhow, Marcy thought resentfully, it was night; they couldn't drive her off to Grandmother Peake's. That was something.

She made no particular attempt to hear what was said. Discouraged at every turn when it came to finding out anything that lay beneath these repeated conferences, she had nearly given up the attempt. Even when she heard Auntie's voice grow angrily incisive—it was never raised—she took no great interest.

"If you'll kindly drop the subject for good and all, Jay, I'll be very much obliged to you. I'm tired of it. I've told you and I've

told Trumbull that I won't consider it. That's all there is to it. Now drop it."

Uncle Jay's own voice became strained. "Now, you look here to me, Cynthia. Done best I can. Can't do more. You listen to reason. Might be somethin' I won't consider, myself, from now on. Ever think o' that?"

There was a long pause. "Is that an ultimatum?" Cynthia asked at last, coldly.

Crittenden did not answer.

"I see." Cynthia's voice whipped against the silence. "You've done enough for me. Is that it?"

"'Bout the size of it, I reckon." Crittenden shifted his huge bulk in his chair. "God A'mighty, Cynthia, I ain't made of money. Things pretty tight. Done best I can. Man can't do more. Trumbull says you c'n do it if you think you can. Says he c'n handle it as treatment even after bill goes into 'fect, 'f you'll behave yourself. I'll pay Trumbull, 'course. All you got to do is let him decrease——"

"And decrease. And decrease. And decrease." Cynthia spoke bitterly. "You don't know what you're talking about. But I do, remember; *I do*." Her voice took on the quality of iron. "And if you do this thing to me, Jay Crittenden, may you——"

"Daught! Daught!" wailed Mrs. Crittenden softly. "Jay, honey, please——"

"Can't help myself, Ma. Ain't got the money. Be 'gainst the law, anyhow, no time 'tall. What's she goin' to do then if she don't mind Trumbull now? You better talk some sense into her."

Cynthia flung her chair back and left the room. Marcy could hear her coming up the stairs. She could hear her sharp, deep breathing as she sat down on the side of the bed and took off her shoes and stockings, as she undressed and buttoned on her nightgown. She knew that Cynthia did not relax as she stretched herself out on the bed; she could feel the rigidity and tension of the long thin body in her own soft flesh.

But she could not speak. She was in a paralysis of fear; her ears had caught and held an ominous phrase. "Against the law" meant but one thing to Marcy—Lottie Hahnemann's illegitimate baby, on whose account Lottie had presumably been flung into jail and made to eat out of tin pans. Marcy remembered the hideous baby she had imagined, the monster, its peaked head covered with slime, and she all but screamed aloud. *Aunty—Aunty eating out of tin pans!*

Marcy stuffed her doubled fist halfway into her mouth as a dreadful determination took shape in her mind. When it came she would kill it. She would kill it with the hammer or the fire irons and hide it in a chicken coop. When they found it they would not know what it was.

—17—

It was an odd assortment of merchandise that came in response to Miss Crittenden's coupons. Marcy, who would scarcely leave her aunt's side now that the dread certainty of forthcoming disgrace and disaster had seized her, looked wonderingly at the sheets of glazed cardboard, each with a picture of a lady in a stylish dress and a small pinked sample of the cloth pasted in a lower corner; at the peculiar book made up of the backs of several books, with here a page and there a picture, but no continuity anywhere; at the near-leather case full of packaged cereals and spices in tiny "sample sizes." In her normal state she would have liked this case, would perhaps even have asked for it. But her perturbation over Aunty and her preoccupation with the need of doing something to avert or conceal the consequences of Aunty's acting or having acted "against the law" left her without capacity for vital interest in these novelties.

"What are they for, Aunty?" she asked listlessly.

Miss Crittenden, at her bedside table, was studying a circular letter that had come with the dress samples. "Never mind," she replied absently. "Just some things I wanted to see." She laid down the letter and rose to open the clothespress, taking out a worn blue serge suit and examining it critically. "It's all out of style," she said, as though to herself, "but it still fits, and I might be able to make it over. I believe I'll——"

She slipped off her house dress and tried on the suit. Winding her long braid about her head, she pinned it securely with a small tortoiseshell comb and looked at herself in the glass. "Hand me that case of spices, will you, Marcy?"

Marcy brought the case, and Cynthia closed it and swung it lightly at her side, looking in the glass again. She laughed, loudly and harshly. "I cut a distinguished figure, don't I?" Her eyes suddenly flamed, and she hurled the case violently across the room. It banged against the opposite wall; the samples flew in every direction. "Don't look so startled, Marcy. It's nothing. I find I'm not up to it, that's all. It's a pity. I could certainly have given Mittie Henley a field day."

She unpinned her braid and let it down; took off the blue serge suit, throwing it down on the floor of the press, and resumed her tan linen house frock. "Nothing else for it," she muttered.

She sat down on the bed, one slender finger picking at the counterpane. "Marcy, look here; I want to ask you a question. How would you like to go and live with your Grandmother Peake?"

Marcy burst into tears. "No, Auntie—no, no——"

"Why, what's the matter? I just asked you; there's no need to cry." Cynthia drew the child to her knee and wiped her eyes. "You're a big girl now. You could get along without Auntie if you had to, couldn't you?"

Marcy sobbed afresh. "No! No! No!"

"Well, don't cry." Cynthia patted her shoulder and rose, pacing the length of the room several times. "All right, Ma; I give

in," she said as Mrs. Crittenden, coming up the stairs to see what had caused the unusual disturbance, appeared anxiously in the doorway. "You can tell Jay he's got me whipped. And I hope you're satisfied, both of you."

Mrs. Crittenden gasped with relief. "Oh, praise the Lord, Daught!"

Cynthia's lip curled. "You praise Him. I'm a little out of practice. Marcy, go out and play. Or no; you and I will have a day for ourselves, while we still can. What would you like to do?"

This unexampled magnificence prevailed over even Marcy's inward anguish, and she followed Cynthia eagerly through a day of successive delights; "making ladies" out of freshly gathered flowers, with sweeping petal skirts and elaborate hats of green lace cut from leaves; reading Mark Twain and *The Wizard of Oz*; having lemonade and cookies on the side porch, with Grandma's cut-glass goblets and decanter. Finally, after the evening meal, the two wandered about the wide garden in the lengthening light, Cynthia still absent-mindedly wearing a garland of small orange-colored lilies Marcy had twined in her dark hair earlier in the afternoon. The little flowers were wilting, but the western light caused them to glow like minor suns. Beneath them Cynthia's white face and opaque dark eyes took on an unearthly and nonhuman quality; she seemed no more to belong to the matter-of-fact world of every day than did the oreads and fauns and centaurs in Marcy's *Wonder Book*. She might have been painted as a pagan prophetess, strange, a little wild, somewhat partaking of evil and certainly tragic; and Marcy, feeling all this without defining it, felt herself translated out of her lesser life into an unfamiliar region of the soul.

Cynthia was tiring of the day's activities. She sank down on the ground beside the calycanthus bush and rested, supporting herself with a hand laid flat against the ground. "Sit down awhile, Marcy. The sun's going down behind the trees. I like to see the twilight."

Marcy sat down beside her, and Reine, let out of the house by Mrs. Crittenden, ambled out to join them.

"There's a poem I want you to learn, Marcy," Cynthia remarked. "Listen: say it after me. *Give all to love; obey thy heart—*"

Marcy obediently repeated the words. "*Friends, kindred, days, estate, good fame, plans, credit, and the Muse—nothing refuse.* I don't know what it means, Aunt," she complained.

"Never mind; someday you will. *'Tis a brave master; let it have scope, follow it utterly, hope beyond hope.* Say it, Marcy."

Marcy repeated the lines.

"*High and more high it dives into noon, with wing unspent, untold intent; but it is a god, knows its own path and the outlets of the sky.*"

These latter lines held what Marcy asked of poetry. She felt the delicious chill, the leaping of the pulses so unutterably dear to her, at "the outlets of the sky." They repeated the rest of the poem, and at the last lines, *When half-gods go, the gods arrive*, she gave a little wriggle of satisfaction.

Cynthia's mood changed suddenly. "I hope I'm not teaching you lies," she said. "But on the whole I believe that, Marcy; that's what love and life would be, if people only knew what they mean. Unfortunately, they don't—except a few here and there, and they never seem to come together. The half-gods keep coming and coming, but they never go, and so the gods never arrive." She was silent for a space, pulling up feathery blades of grass and casting them aside. "I may be wrong, Marcy, but I think you have great capacities for—what am I talking about?" She checked herself and laughed, cupping Marcy's chin for a moment in her hand. "Nine years old, and I talk her the talk of forty. Well, honey, this is what the poem means: Don't refuse life, don't be afraid of experience, never go back on truth. I've left the Bible teaching to Ma, but I want you to remember one verse for me: *Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.* That's the grandest

verse in the Bible, and I don't know but what it's the finest saying anywhere."

"That's what Dr. Trumbull said," Marcy observed.

"Dr. Trumbull?" Cynthia seemed surprised. "One never knows what people are really like. The truth must have been a pretty bitter dose for him too, sometimes—especially about Diane, poor child."

"Aunty," Marcy took advantage of Cynthia's softened mood to inquire, "what did make Diane like that?"

Cynthia hesitated, looking down thoughtfully into the clear gray eyes. At last she shook her head. "I don't know, honey," she said gently. "But she's not going to have to put up with it much longer. Dr. Trumbull tells me he doesn't expect her to live to grow up. Probably this time next year she'll be through with it all."

Marcy's eyes widened. "Do you mean she's going to die?"

Cynthia nodded.

"But she's only a little girl!"

"Little girls die too, sometimes. Even babies, Marcy."

Marcy considered. Yes, babies did die. Mrs. Furness' baby boys had died, all of them, four in a row. But Diane!

"What will they do with all her toys, Aunty?" she asked.

Cynthia laughed mirthlessly. "Ah, yes, we move on quickly. What indeed? Poor Diane! How should I know? But she'll be better off."

"In heaven?"

"If you like. You ought to know better than to ask me that, Marcy. You're not talking to Ma. Look, it's getting dark. Here's one more poem for you; it'll suit your evangelical mood, and it's gorgeous, whether it's true or not:

*The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,*

*Stains the white radiance of Eternity
Until Death tramples it to fragments. Die,
If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!"*

It was indeed gorgeous. "Oh, Aunty!" Marcy breathed.

"Mind you, I don't believe it. Not even Shelley can convince me that eternity's a white radiance. I don't want to be convinced, anyhow; I don't want to believe it's anything but oblivion." She paused, half smiling. "I could write a poem about that myself, I believe: *Morning, evening, day by day Let me seek my cell and pray, Pleading inconsistently, God forbid that God should be.* How do you like that?"

"It doesn't mean anything," Marcy objected.

"Oh, well, neither does anything else," said Cynthia. "Get up, Reine, you lazy hound. It's time to go in the house."

—18—

ON THE first Sunday after the arbitrary return of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Marcy successfully evaded Sunday school on a plea of illness, but on the second Sunday Miss Crittenden was not to be deceived.

"Oh, no, you're not," she replied coolly to Marcy's repeated assertions that she was "sick at her stomach." "I know exactly what's the matter with you, young lady, and it isn't going to do you a bit of good. Something's got to be done to cure you of being so chickenhearted, Marcy. Uncle Jay brought you a new blue sash and ribbons from St. Louis; go bring me your white embroidery dress and let's see how they look. And I want to hear the Golden Text when you get home. Don't you try any tricks with me."

Marcy, insulted, went morosely to get the dress. This wholesale denial of her pathologic symptoms had been a bit too sweeping; she was quite honestly "sick at her stomach," though she knew as

well as her aunt did what the cause actually was. But there was never any use arguing with Aunty.

She tried dismally to summon the Major to back her up, but he would not manifest himself. She caught a flying glimpse of him—the last she was ever to have—on the street as she approached the open door of the church, but when he caught sight of her he turned his head away, affecting unawareness, and marched off at a quickened pace, his sabers clanking briskly. Marcy went disconsolately up the stairs and into the sanctuary, sliding into her place as inconspicuously as possible. She had a final gleam of hope; maybe Mrs. Hunt would not be there.

But she was. At the end of the preliminary service she joined her class as usual, smiling her overwhelming smile. A change indeed flitted over her face as she saw Marcy, but on the whole she did not seem ill pleased. There was a certain satisfaction in her eyes. She did not pause as usual to compliment the little girls on their dresses and ribbons or to inquire after their mothers; she was all business today.

The Golden Text was "Touch not, taste not, handle not." Mrs. Hunt wasted little time on it. "Now, girls," she said briskly, "we've had lessons on this text before, and you all know, anyway, how wicked it is to drink strong liquor and get drunk. Of course, I don't have to tell little girls not to get drunk, because ladies don't drink, anyway. But there are other things just as bad—and worse."

Mrs. Jolly paused impressively. "And ladies do do them, or women, anyhow, who call themselves ladies and think they are finer ladies than anybody else, at that. How many of you girls"—Mrs. Jolly lowered her voice—"have ever heard of the drug habit?"

The little girls stared wonderingly at her. Nobody had.

"The drug habit," continued Mrs. Jolly Hunt, abandoning all pretense of instructing the class as a whole and settling her cold gaze upon Marcy's bewildered one, "is a dreadful, wicked, filthy

habit that some men and women get into because they're bad and weak and can't control themselves. They start taking these dreadful drugs—morphine, one of them is called—and they get so they'll do anything, no matter how wicked it is, to get them. They will lie, or steal, or kill. Nothing matters to them except getting the drug. They are outcasts among decent people. They are disgraced, and nobody wants to go near them or have anything to do with them, any more than you would want to go near a dirty tramp covered with sores. If they can't get the drug, they go crazy—stark, staring crazy; they scream and beat their heads against the wall; sometimes they murder their own family. These bad drugs are going to be against the law pretty soon"—Marcy caught her breath—"and then they'll get what is coming to them. We call these people a dreadful name, decent people do."

Mrs. Jolly Hunt made a long pause. Marcy, whose gaze had dropped from the teacher's face to her hands, seemed to see one of those pudgy hands leave its place on the Sunday-school quarterly, seize the front of her, Marcy's, white embroidery dress, thrust itself inside dress and flesh and bone, and drop a cold, heavy ball of something into her breast. She tried to look at the other girls to see if they noticed, but she could not. The hand was still there, pressing the cold heavy ball against her breast from the inside as if to keep it there until Marcy's heart should open like a mouth and swallow it.

"We call them drug fiends," finished Mrs. Jolly Hunt, still impressively, but briskly now, for she had seen Marcy's eyes and was appeased.

When Marcy got home Auntie was sitting on the front porch, reading. She looked peaceful and pretty. Marcy looked at her miserably.

"Well, how was Sunday school?" asked Auntie amiably. She had apparently forgotten about wanting to hear the Golden Text.

"All right," replied Marcy wretchedly. Drug fiend, she said to herself, hurting herself again and again with the jagged words.

Drug fiend, drug fiend, drug fiend. Auntie was a drug fiend. It did not sound true. It sounded like a story, not a good story, the kind of story you stop reading, sick at your stomach, because it is not good.

Auntie got up and went into the house to help Grandma get dinner on the table. Marcy slipped away upstairs. She wanted to see for herself, though there had been no real doubt in her mind after Mrs. Jolly Hunt had said "against the law." Mrs. Hunt had meant Auntie; she had meant to punish Marcy because Auntie had sent back the book.

She opened Auntie's lower dresser drawer with stealthy caution. There it was, the stubby little round bottle with the bright red label. "Morphine," Mrs. Hunt had said. Marcy took the bottle up and held it to the light. The name was there, though it was spelled peculiarly: *Morphinae sulfas. Poison.* The bottle was nearly empty. Two or three of the little white cubes rolled about on the powdery bottom of the vial as Marcy replaced it.

Marcy sat back on her heels, the cold ball swelling in her heart. There was not much comfort now in knowing that she had been wrong about the monstrous baby and her fearful duty to exterminate it; here was a new horror, even more terrifying because of its vagueness. Auntie's medicine would soon be against the law. That was what Uncle Jay had been talking about all this time. He wanted Auntie to— What did he want Auntie to do? Auntie couldn't get along without her medicine. Even Marcy knew that.

But suppose she couldn't get it any more? Marcy's breast ached as she remembered what Mrs. Jolly Hunt had said; perhaps Auntie would—would go crazy? "They beat their heads against the wall," Mrs. Hunt had said. Marcy took her own wretched little head in both her hands at the thought. "No more than you'd want to go near a dirty tramp covered with sores." That was silly, with Auntie always so particular about soap and water and fingernails. But maybe after a while, if she couldn't get her medicine . . . ?

"Marcy!" Auntie called from below. "Where are you? Dinner's

ready. Come on and sit down. Your Grandmother Peake's expecting you right after dinner."

Marcy pushed the drawer silently shut and went downstairs.

—19—

MRS. HUNT had acted with a fatal timeliness. The very next morning Auntie called Marcy to her side. "Marcy, you know my medicine in the red bottle, that you've been getting for me from Mr. Furness at the drugstore?"

The cold heavy ball turned over in Marcy's heart. She nodded.

"Well, I'm not going to get it there any more. It's very strong medicine, and the government is going to start watching the sale of it pretty soon. So Dr. Trumbull is going to give me mine from now on. I need some today, and I want you to run up to his office and get it for me."

"All right," replied Marcy dully.

Ordinarily she liked to go to Dr. Trumbull's office. He kept all his own drugs, and it was interesting to look at the scores of big and little bottles, at the mortar and pestle, and at the baby picture of Diane that stood on his desk, the picture taken before they knew Diane was "not right." But today she climbed his dusty stairs slowly, wishing she might never reach the top.

She gave him the bottle and Auntie's note, and he frowned blackly.

"Couldn't they have found some other way—" he began. "All right, Marcy. Sit down. There's a new copy of *Puck*. Look at the pictures."

Marcy took up the magazine, but she did not try to look at it. She watched Dr. Trumbull. He was filling Auntie's bottle with a white medicine, but not the smooth little cubes. This medicine was in ragged lumps like coarse sugar.

"It looks different," she ventured.

"It's just a different shape," he replied.

But Marcy was sure Aunty would not like it.

She did not. "This is not my medicine," she said.

Marcy explained eagerly. "He says it's just the same, only a different shape."

Aunty smelled the medicine and tasted it. Her forehead reddened with anger.

"It's the same thing," she admitted, "but cheap, second-grade stuff. The old fool!" She flung the bottle down on the floor. Some of the white lumps slid out of it.

"Pick it up," said Aunty, her face white with fury, "and march right straight back there and give it back to him. Tell him I won't take it. Do you hear?"

Marcy looked imploringly at her, but Aunty did not see the look. For the first time in Marcy's life she seemed oblivious of the child's distress. She had turned away and was standing by the window, her hands clenched.

Marcy picked up the bottle and put the spilled lumps back into it. At the door she paused, hoping that she need not go after all; but Aunty did not move.

"Tell her it's that or nothing," Dr. Trumbull said.

Marcy took the bottle and turned away.

"Wait," said Dr. Trumbull. He took the bottle gently from her. "Tell her it's nothing, until she asks for this. She won't get it from Furness, either; I've seen to that." He laid his hand on the child's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Marcy."

Marcy could not look at him. She could not let him see the terror in her face. Oh, why had she not run down the stairs the minute the precious bottle was back in her hands?

Aunty met her at the door. "Well?"

Marcy gasped. "He—he wasn't there."

"Then where's the bottle you took back?"

Marcy stared piteously at her; a dry sob caught in her throat.

It was no use to lie. "He said it was that or nothing, and then he took it back and said it was nothing until you asked for that."

"He'll wait a long time for that," Cynthia Crittenden said in a voice suddenly quiet, her clenched hands relaxing. "He'll wait a long time for that." She went into a room, an unused bedroom, and locked the door.

Grandma came in. "What is it, Marcy?" she asked.

"Dr. Trumbull wouldn't give me Aunty's medicine," said Marcy.

"Because she sent the other back?"

Marcy nodded.

Grandma caught her breath. "God help us," she whispered. "Marcy, you poor child, you!"

Marcy's chin quivered.

"Come eat your dinner, honey," Grandma said. "Never mind. Aunty'll feel better after a while. She can't do without her medicine. I reckon Grandma'll have to go see Dr. Trumbull herself. Sit down and eat, baby child."

Aunty stayed in the closed bedroom all day and all night. But she did not sleep. Marcy, lying lonely in the wide bed they had shared, heard her walking up and down, up and down the room. At last the child slept, and when she woke in the morning there were two sounds: the sound of heavy rain and the sound of Aunty's footsteps as she still paced up and down.

At noon she called Marcy into the room. Reine, who had been sitting in dumb agony outside the locked door, tried to rush in ahead of Marcy but was savagely repelled. "Go up to Dr. Trumbull's and get my medicine," Aunty said.

"The kind he sent before?" faltered Marcy.

Aunty's eyes burned strangely. "Did you hear me?" she demanded.

Marcy put on her raincape and the cap that went with it, and for the first time in her life went forth with unwashed face and uncombed hair. It was a cloudburst; the rain on her head

and shoulders was like pelting lead. There was a heavy wind, too, whirling solid sheets of water into her face. The ground ran deep with muddy water; she staggered blindly through puddle after puddle, her feet and legs soaked and heavy. She tried to run, but the wind blew the corners of her rubber cape into her eyes and blinded her; she ran against a tree, striking her forehead a hard blow. It seemed hours before she was downtown, before she could see Dr. Trumbull's office door at the corner of the block.

There was a little white paper pasted to the door. Marcy's scalp crawled. Dr. Trumbull was not there.

He was not there. He was not there. He was not there.

She plodded on. She came up to the door. One corner of the paper was torn loose by the wind, and she pressed it down to read the notice.

"Out of town," it said. "Back Friday or Saturday."

This was Tuesday.

Perhaps he had not gone. Perhaps he was at his house, packing his suitcase. Marcy turned and fled through the rain.

"Child!" exclaimed Mrs. Trumbull. "What on earth are you doing out in such a storm as this? Come in, for goodness' sake, and let me get you some of Diane's dry clothes. What on earth?"

"I can't," Marcy gasped. "I have to go back home. Is Dr. Trumbull already gone?"

"Why, yes, he is, dear. He left for St. Louis on the nine-o'clock train. Why? What's wrong?"

"Did he—did he leave any medicine for Auntie?"

Comprehension dawned in Mrs. Trumbull's eyes. "No, he didn't, Marcy. He was called away in a hurry, and I suppose he forgot it. Dear me—I wonder——"

"I must go. Good-by," stammered Marcy.

Auntie, too, was out in the rain, waiting for Marcy. She wore no wrap, only her nightgown and the brown robe. Her hair was down and dripping, her face chalky. She seized Marcy's arm. "Did you get it?" she demanded.

Marcy shook her head. Auntie's fingers tightened on her arm, hurting her. "What do you mean by telling me that? Why didn't you get it?"

Marcy swallowed. "He—he wasn't in his office."

"Why didn't you go to his house?"

"I did. He wasn't there, either." Marcy gulped. "He's—he's out of town."

"When will he be back?"

"It said Friday or Saturday," wailed Marcy, unable any longer to control herself and bursting into tears.

Auntie flung her aside and stood looking down at her. "Stop that crying," she said mechanically. "There's nothing to cry about. You'd better laugh; I've got my come-uppance this time."

Auntie laughed. Marcy's heart shook within her.

Grandma came out of the house. "Daught, come in," she commanded, a sudden strength in her slight voice. "Marcy, come in. You'll have everybody in town standing around in five minutes. Marcy, go in the house. Daught, think of the child. God will punish you for this sin against her."

Auntie laughed again. "God'll punish me—when all He's got to do it with is hell! No, no, Ma; I could teach God things about that. As for Marcy, I've kept her in cotton wool as long as I can. Let her learn now what life is like and hell is like and the whole infernal scheme is like. Now's as good a time as any. Trumbull's gone for nearly a week; she can learn a good deal in that time, if I don't die before he gets back. Let her learn. Let her learn!"

She turned, shaking, and went into the house. Grandma followed, her lips moving silently. Cynthia flung herself down on the bed in the unused room, turning ceaselessly from side to side, one hand pressed against her open mouth.

Grandma called Marcy. "I reckon we'd better try another doctor, honey. Suppose you put on your coat and go over to Dr. Llewellyn's. Tell him Dr. Trumbull forgot Auntie's medicine and ask him if he'll let us have enough for a few days."

It had stopped raining. Marcy rang the bell at Dr. Llewellyn's. He came to the door and heard her through without speaking.

Finally he shook his head. "Tell your grandmother I'm sorry, for her sake, but I can't do anything. It's Dr. Trumbull's case, and I don't think he forgot the medicine. Tell her I can't interfere."

"Go over and get Uncle Jay," Grandma said.

Uncle Jay came. He tried to make Auntie go upstairs to bed. He had matches in his pocket. Auntie snatched one and set fire to the brown robe. The flames were halfway up it before they were extinguished.

Marcy went into the kitchen. She took all the sharp knives from the drawer and carried them upstairs, hiding them outside a window, on a ledge of roof.

She went to the shelf in the closet where the medicines were kept. There was a bottle of mercury bichloride, and there was a tin of Paris green for the garden. These Marcy hid under her mattress. She threw all the kitchen matches out on the rain-soaked ground.

Finally she stole back to the door of the unused bedroom. The eyes that burned against the white face on the bed were those of a trapped animal.

Uncle Jay was tearing a strong sheet into wide strips. "I'll tie you," he was saying, "if I have to. I've done it before, and I'll do it again."

"Jay," cried Grandma, "the child! Marcy, you go upstairs, honey. Mind Grandma, now. You can't do any good here."

Marcy retreated. As she turned away there was a scuffling sound, and then a short, sharp scream. A moment later she heard Uncle Jay speak. "There's one more doctor," he said, "if you c'n call him that. I'll go try to get Simpson to give her some. Furness, the damned fool, wouldn't sell me any; Trumbull put the fear of God into him."

The front door banged.

Marcy crept up on her own bed and lay without moving. A

long time afterward she heard men's voices; Uncle Jay's and another. She heard them enter the bedroom and pause beside the bound and helpless creature on the bed. There was a silence; then Aunty's natural voice, saying "Thank you, Doctor."

The cold ball lay heavy in Marcy's heart. It was over, she told herself. Now it was time to stop worrying; tomorrow Aunty would be all right, and Saturday Dr. Trumbull would be back. It was over.

But she knew it was not over. She knew it had only begun.

Something else was over, instead. Marcy did not know what it was.

The cold ball lay heavy in her heart. She tried to cover it with a luminous word. "Christmas," she whispered, and waited for the room to begin sparkling and shining.

Nothing happened.

She tried a word that had never failed her before. "Puppy dog," she said aloud.

But this time there were no wriggling silken ears under the hand she stretched out to pat him.

Marcy sobbed and turned over on the bed. The cold heavy ball turned over, too, and settled again, seeming to grow a little as it did so.

—20—

DR. TRUMBULL, returning unexpectedly a day later, came at once to the Crittenden house to offer conventional apologies for his "inadvertent" failure to make arrangements against Cynthia's need during his absence. Marcy, watching her aunt's impassive countenance and satiric eyes as he talked, felt a sudden curdling of her blood; what would Aunty say when he was through?

But Cynthia did not hear him through. "You are lowering yourself quite unnecessarily, Doctor," she interrupted him with

deadly directness. "Give me credit for at least the rudiments of intelligence. You are quite aware that I know you left me in—as you did leave me—with deliberate purpose and intention."

Dr. Trumbull made a gesture of resignation. "Very well. I'll not deny it. Something had to be done to bring you to your senses." He fingered the gold head of his cane for a moment in silence. "I have been a friend of this house, Cynthia, and your friend, for all the years of your life. I have only your welfare at heart. When you feel inclined to judge me too hardly, you might just bear that fact in mind."

"I have not forgotten it, Dr. Trumbull," Cynthia said. "If I had," she added deliberately, her quiet voice like the narrow edge of a whetted blade, "your life would not be safe in this house this evening."

"Daught!" breathed Mrs. Crittenden from the shadows in the corner. Marcy caught her breath and looked involuntarily at the sabers over the fireplace.

Dr. Trumbull's gaze and Cynthia's met and locked. Finally the old man turned slightly aside, shrugging his shoulders. "Well; well. I'm sorry, Cynthia. I know it must have been hard."

"Hard?" Cynthia laughed. She rose and paced across the room; at the opposite wall she turned and faced him. "Jay brought Dr. Simpson. Dr. Simpson, you understand; no decent doctor would come. He brought that scum of the earth, a man that came up from the muck and will go down in the mire, into this house—my father's house, Dr. Trumbull, and your friend's—for me to lick his hand like a starving dog. And I did it, do you hear? I did it." Her eyes burned; her fine-drawn features twitched at the memory. "I was glad to do it." She laughed again. "And Dr. Simpson had nothing to lose; he gave me—he gave me—" She flung up her head and looked Trumbull squarely in the eyes as though determined to spare him nothing. "And then my brother untied my hands, so that I could take it."

She smiled at his involuntary recoil. "Oh, yes. I was a bit un-

ruly, it seems, and before the child. So he had tied me, also before the child. Dr. Simpson, I believe, helped him undo the knots." She sank into the nearest chair, still smiling, her hands moving back and forth along its arms. "Hard?" she repeated meditatively. "Yes; that is scarcely an exaggeration, Dr. Trumbull."

Trumbull was silent. Mrs. Crittenden stirred agitatedly. "Daught, you're all worn out. Go upstairs and lie down. She's still nervous, Doctor, she——"

"Leave us alone, Ma. Now, Dr. Trumbull, I've nothing more to say. I consented to this scheme of yours in the first place only because of the child. It may be that I have forfeited the right to be considered a human being or treated like one; that's as you look at it. But if you think so, you have no justification in trying to hold me here on Marcy's account, for I can do her nothing but harm. If you think that in the future you will be able to treat me with at least as much consideration as I give my dog, I'll stick to my side of the bargain—for the time being. The decision rests with you."

Trumbull was angered. "So far as you yourself are concerned, Cynthia, you drove me out of all patience a long time ago. Respect for your mother and my long friendship with the family are all that bring me here today. You are putting a severe strain upon both." He let the ferrule of his cane strike sharply against the floor, and rose. "All this would have been unnecessary if you had co-operated with me the last time we tried it. I repeat that something had to be done to bring you to your senses. I did the only thing I could think of. I have made you my apologies for the unavoidable distress it caused you. But it is not my fault, Cynthia"—he looked at her piercingly—"that you were 'glad' to—to lick Dr. Simpson's hand, as you put it. Remember that."

Cynthia's eyes blazed; she raised them to her father's portrait. "It was——"

Trumbull struck the floor again with his cane. "No, Cynthia; it was not. Not his and not mine. Your father could not have forced

you into this. God Himself could never have driven you, even when you were a child, unless your will consented. You know that as well as I do. Your own choice has brought you to this pass, and your own will must bring you out of it. Think it over." He reached for his hat. "I'll be in to see you again in a few days, unless you send me word not to come."

He shook hands punctiliously with Mrs. Crittenden; passing Marcy at the door, he laid his hand for a moment on her shoulder. "Be a good girl, Marcy," he said.

Marcy hardly heard him. She was looking at Cynthia, who now stood silhouetted against the window, her back turned, and did not move until the doctor had got into his buggy and driven away.

Mrs. Crittenden cleared her throat timidly. "Daught, honey——"

"He's right," Cynthia said slowly, turning. "Even about Clifton Brown." She spoke the name contemptuously. "Pa could have locked every door in the house and dug a ditch around it, and I'd still have got out if I'd wanted to—or, rather, if *he* had wanted me to." Even Marcy knew that "he" meant Clifton Brown. "He let Pa lock me up; he didn't want me very badly." She lifted her head, and in the ravaged hauteur of her white face in the firelight Marcy saw again, as she had seen it in the photograph, the imperious beauty of that countenance twenty years before. "Was I to let him know I wanted him more than he wanted me? Oh, yes, I did, Ma. I'd have gone to him, marriage or no marriage, Crittenden or no Crittenden, at the drop of a hat—don't think I wouldn't. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but people like you have no more notion of what love can be like——"

She drew a sharp breath. "It could have been——" She stopped again. "It might have been the glory of the Lord that you're always talking about, Ma—for that's what love is, whether you know it or not—and don't tell me I'm blasphemous. Denying it is the blasphemy. Clifton Brown was the blasphemer. He pretended to love me, but he didn't; he wasn't big enough to get within

speaking distance of love. He was just a little man, after all. Just a respectable little man who didn't dare lift a finger to take me away from Pa. I must have known it even then, for I never betrayed myself—thank God, I never betrayed myself! I must have known he'd be the perfect Southern knight of chivalry and protect me gallantly even from myself." Her pale mouth twisted in a ghastly smile. "Well, I daresay respectability and convention have done well by him. He certainly looked it, the last time I saw him."

Mrs. Crittenden looked at her piteously. "Daught, was that why—was that why you began—"

"No, it wasn't." Cynthia whirled upon her. "Don't you say that to me, Ma. Do you think I'd throw my life away for spite, or for anything a man like Clifton Brown could do to me? I won't take that even from you. You ought to know me better. You ought to know that no man on earth could twist up my life and throw it away. No man, that is, but Pa." She laughed wildly. "Pa was smarter than the rest of them. He gave me a better reason." She fixed her eyes on Mrs. Crittenden's in a terrible gaze. "He lied to me. He told me"—she paused and gasped as though the icy shock were still upon her—"he told me I had a stroke of the tar brush. He said there was Negro blood in my veins."

She hesitated before her mother's horrified recoil, and then plunged on. "He said I wasn't his child or yours; he said I wasn't a Crittenden at all. He said he'd taken me from a patient, a friend of his, who had found out about the taint in his dead wife's blood and had committed suicide. He had all the details ready for me, he said, if I wanted them. I didn't want them. I suppose he knew I wouldn't. I suppose he knew he was safe enough there. All I wanted in earth or heaven or hell was to have him get out of my room and never come near me again."

She clenched both hands at her temples. "I was a fool to believe him. I tried not to. I kept telling myself it was a lie, a low-down black lie, as black and rotten a lie as any devil from hell could have told. And there was some of it I never did believe; I

never did believe you weren't my mother, and I never did believe, either, that Pa would adopt any child that had Negro blood—not Pa! But that only made it worse; I thought—I'm sorry, Ma—I thought he might be protecting you! And I couldn't ask you, could I? I couldn't ask you a thing like that! I couldn't ask anybody—I couldn't tell anybody—I couldn't risk marrying, I had to be sure—oh, my God, I went clear out of my mind—clear out of my mind!”

She turned away for an instant, then faced her cowering mother with a sort of bitter defiance. “And there I was locked up in his office, and there it was in the cabinet. . . . Why not? I wasn't twenty years old, and my own father had as good as told me my life was over.”

“But, Daught, didn't he ever—didn't he ever—”

Cynthia laughed harshly. “Oh, yes, he told me it was a lie, all right—a year later. A year later, you understand. After he was quite sure there was no more danger of my marrying Clifton. After he was quite sure”—she suddenly choked and sobbed aloud—“that there was no more life of my own left in me to live. He laughed about it. ‘I had you fooled there for a while, didn't I?’ he said. Oh, my God—my God!” She walked distractedly back and forth, her thin hands clenched, and suddenly laughed again. “But he didn't look so smart a few minutes later, when I told him what I'd been up to while he had me fooled.”

The fire went out of her. Her shoulders lifted and fell. “Poor Ma,” she said listlessly, “I'm sorry for you. I've certainly put you through hell.”

Mrs. Crittenden's face was like a mask of death; tears poured down her withering cheeks. But she thrust her own pain aside. “Daught, Daught,” she cried in her soft, mourning voice, “you must try to forgive your father, honey; he would have his way, but he meant it for good. And don't you feel bad about your mother. Don't you know your mother loves you, honey? Don't you know she'd go through anything on earth—”

"Hush," Cynthia commanded. "Don't talk that way. I can't stand it." She drew a long, hard breath. "You're a fool, Ma. We're all fools. Why should you love me? Why should anybody love anybody? We're like animals in a steel trap, with a few hours to struggle and snarl and tear ourselves to pieces, or to cower back and cry, according to our natures; and we talk about loving one another. No animal but man has ever been so stupid."

Mrs. Crittenden could not answer her. She had no words to express her childlike faith that what Cynthia called stupidity was instead divinity, and she could not honestly, poor woman, with the relentless teeth in her own shrinking flesh, her own blood warm on the snow, deny the trap's existence. All her desire, from her gentle girlhood up, had been for tranquil love, and all her portion had been violence and devastation.

She knew that she had never been a match for Cynthia and that nothing she could say would influence her. Nevertheless, she made a gallant effort: "Faith, Daught, and hope——"

Cynthia shook her head. "No, Ma. You might just as well put them both out of your mind as far as I'm concerned. I'm never going to give you any peace, don't you know that? I've given you none for twenty years, and I'll give you none to the end. As long as there's any life left in me I'll claw you, and claw myself, and claw Jay and even Marcy, until somebody or something comes along at last and drags me out and beats my head against a rock. You'd better pray, if you still believe in praying, that it'll be before I've clawed through to Marcy's vitals. If I——"

"Marcy," Mrs. Crittenden put in with nervous haste, "you go on up to bed, honey-pie. Mind Grandma, now."

"What?" Cynthia wheeled about as Marcy, her legs like rubber beneath her, rose to obey. "Was she in here all the time? O Lord. Now I've done it. Yes, yes," as Marcy hesitated, looking at her, "go on; go on to bed. . . . I didn't know she was here," she added on a long, yielding sigh, as she sank into a chair. "It doesn't matter any more, though."

She pulled her braid over her shoulder and fingered it, her hands shaking. "There's Reine at the door. Let her in, will you, Ma?"

Mrs. Crittenden rose and admitted the dog, who plodded across to Cynthia and laid her head on her knee. Cynthia's hands left her hair and caressed the shaggy head. She smiled down tenderly into the worshiping eyes.

"Good old Reine," she said, stroking. "Dear old girl."

The old dog shuddered from head to foot with ecstasy. Mrs. Crittenden, dismissed, went to her room to pray.

— 21 —

THE WEEKS that followed were nerve-racking. Cynthia could not or would not adjust herself to the new schedule. Her smoldering, occasionally flaring anger against Dr. Trumbull led her constantly to play tricks upon him, even though the inevitable sequel was agony for herself. She would indulge herself as usual for several days, entirely disregarding his order that she decrease her allowance of the drug, and then would torture herself and everyone else throughout the miserable, interminable days and nights that stretched between her and the next supply. For Trumbull was quite inexorable. He would not alter by even an hour, by even a minute, the specified time of relief.

To Marcy the change in her life was cataclysmic. As one break in a sea wall sets free the disastrous waters in every direction, so the breach of that long-locked silence "before the child" released in the tormented mind of Cynthia Crittenden all the pent furies she had been so hardly repressing. Often and again Marcy had known Aunty bitter beyond words, but she had never known her violent. Now her temper, on the days when she was short of the drug, was a thing to flee from, and her grim silences, during which

sometimes she would look at Marcy as though she had never seen the child before, were even harder to endure.

Cold desolation swept the little girl's heart before that stranger's stare. The terror of coming home from school or Sunday school and finding Auntie "in a bad humor" was nothing to it. Even the nights when Auntie would not come to bed but raged through the orchard in the wind and rain, her dark robe blowing wide behind her and the frenzied Reine at her heels, while Marcy, half paralyzed with fright, watched her from an upstairs window and nervously counted over and over in her mind the possibly dangerous utensils and drugs the house contained, to make sure she had hidden them all—even these nights of hell could be borne more easily than that look on Auntie's face.

There was no help in Grandma. Mrs. Crittenden, bracing her slight shoulders against the shock of Cynthia's appalling revelation, grew quickly pale and silent; she talked to her flowers no more. Except for necessary utterances her speech nowadays consisted of a ceaseless, nearly soundless mutter of prayer. She was of her age and region, and she trembled for the Major's soul. Even on her daughter's good days her eyes were hunted and hollow, and she flinched when she was spoken to.

Jay Crittenden came seldom to the house, for Cynthia's bitterness was hard against him, and more than once she drove him from her door with an awful and deliberate curse upon his head. It was impossible in Cynthia's tragic presence, within the sound of her low but iron tones, to dismiss these imprecations as nonsense. Marcy, overhearing, quivered to the inmost core of her body; she saw the writhing serpents and the licking fires of the library Inferno come to life and slither across the room. Once Cynthia turned and caught her standing there with one hand involuntarily flung up in terror before her eyes. "And what's the matter with you?" she demanded.

Marcy looked at her piteously; the hand fell to her side. "Nothing, Auntie," she whispered.

It was perhaps the pathetic, barely articulated "Aunty" that brought Cynthia to herself. Her expression altered, but she had not the power to call Marcy to her for comfort. Woman and child stood looking at each other, each one silently claiming, with all the accumulated strength of nine years' intimate interweaving of personality, what the other no longer had any power to give. The gulf between them was never quite to be bridged again.

Marcy had been Cynthia's armor against despair. But now, with the casting aside of restraint, she had become a reproach and a torment, a thousand torments piled upon ten thousand others. Cynthia had been Marcy's all, as any child's mother may be to any child, until the moment of dreadful revelation. All knowledge, all experience, all hope and all comfort had been summed up for her in the single word Aunty. Now Aunty was another person, separate forever, no longer a part of Marcy's self, estranged by a wild and terrible weaning the child was not old enough to comprehend.

At last Cynthia drew a long, shuddering breath. "Go out and play, Marcy," she urged gently. "Inez was calling you a little while ago. Run over and see her awhile if you want to."

Marcy did not want to play with Inez, but she obeyed and went out into the garden. Mrs. Crittenden was there, pacing slowly up and down the path, now and then picking a dead leaf from a bending golden spray. The trees were beginning to turn; the whole garden was lit with touches of fiery color. Old Reine sat in a curling drift of fallen yellow leaves near the house, gazing wistfully at the front door. Cynthia had driven her forth, and her great eyes, dimming rapidly with age, were fixed immovably upon the spot whence would come her license to return. Marcy paused to pat her, but she did not stir except to thump her tail faintly in acknowledgment. With a surge of fellow feeling the little girl sat down on the leaves and put an arm about the dog's neck, turning her own gaze also toward the house.

She was conscious of a certain unease as she did so. "Why don't

you ever have your house painted?" Inez Colton had demanded only yesterday. "Look at those—those"—Inez struggled for her word, indicating with a motion of her shoulder the tall old pillars of the front veranda—"those *postes!*" She made two syllables of the word; hesitated again, as though aware of something amiss; and then, magnificently dismissing diction as unworthy of her attention, resumed her scolding where she had left it off. "They're all peelin' away. They look awful. My papa says so. Aren't you ever goin' to have 'em painted?"

Marcy looked at the pillars. Inez was right; they were gray with weathering and uneven with age. Only their stately height and a flake of whitish paint here and there gave earnest of their pristine dignity. "I don't know," she said, and tried to laugh.

Inez tossed her head. "My papa has our house painted every two years," she announced self-righteously. "This one hasn't been painted in about a hundred or two thousand years, I reckon."

That night Marcy looked at the house, inside and out, as though she were seeing it for the first time. She noticed things she had never regarded before: the shabbiness of the brocade in the parlor curtains, the threadbare carpet in the library, the discolored spots on the upstairs ceilings, under which Grandma nowadays set pans and buckets to catch the encroaching rain. The house had "settled"; it had passed the stage of disrepair that may be considered picturesque and had arrived at the one that precedes disintegration. Now that the leaves were falling, its sorrowful air of neglect was the more apparent. The thin clear light of autumn made an open secret of its humbled state.

Marcy, seeing her home as it had become, was profoundly troubled. She averted her eyes as she had averted them from the sight of wet clothes hanging in the library next to Grandpa's portrait and sabers, the piano, Shakespeare and Dickens and Kipling and Mark Twain. What was happening to her family? What was Grandmother Peake perhaps thinking about the Crittenden house? What were things coming to?

She thought of the all-powerful God of the revival preacher's harangues. Why didn't He do something about these things? Why didn't He help Aunty get over wanting her medicine? Why didn't He—

Perhaps people were to God as Reine was to Aunty. Perhaps all they could do was worship and hope, but never get in where He was.

Marcy never saw Grandpa nowadays, nor did she wish to; the last extremity of horror had lain for her in Cynthia's words of accusation, and she could not even think of him without nausea. But close upon her doubt of God's wisdom and omnipotence she did remember him, and she knew that he would have shaken his head. "Deep waters, Marcy, deep waters. Homer didn't know. Shakespeare didn't know. Descartes didn't know. Even I don't know. What do you think you are, anyway—a hoary philosopher? Go play with your paper dolls."

But Grandpa had no influence over her now. Like Mrs. Crittenden, though without her saintlike concern, Marcy felt that there was little hope of Grandpa's ever knowing God at first hand. She could no longer accept his point of view with regard to anything, and certainly not with regard to philosophy or God.

There was an undischarged responsibility somewhere. God might be all-powerful or impotent; He might be interested or indifferent; He might be callous or compassionate; but one thing, she felt, was certain. If He were God at all, He knew perfectly well that this was no way for a Crittenden to have to live.

—22—

DIANE TRUMBULL died in October. On the last day of her life, a school holiday, Dr. Trumbull had taken her and Marcy to the autumn Stock Show as usual. They had had many rides on the

steam swing; they had bought light canes decorated with black and yellow ribbon; they had gambled lavishly at various booths, and Diane, by a lucky chance, had won a garish doll dressed in scarlet feathers, which filled her with an ecstasy that all her costly toys at home had never been able to produce. They had even tried the Ferris wheel, but neither of them liked it. Diane was terrified, and Marcy, sitting tense at the top of the circuit when the operator roguishly stopped the machine to provide an extra thrill, felt her stomach turn over and her scalp crawl as they always did when she went to get Aunty's medicine and found on the office door the pasted slip of paper that meant the doctor was not there.

Except for that, it was a perfect day. Nothing untoward had happened at home before they started, and Marcy's mind for the time being was unclouded with any particular anxiety. There was a clean, brisk wind, whetted a little with a sharpness belonging properly to a somewhat later season, but the children wore their light coats and found it only pleasantly stimulating. They skipped happily along after Dr. Trumbull, swinging their canes, greeting acquaintances, and stopping for brief converse with Mrs. Peake and a cluster of her friends, who were waiting for the trotting races to begin. Marcy was momentarily uncomfortable; Grandmother Peake did not approve of her intimacy with Diane.

When they turned homeward in the deepening dusk, Diane was singing. There was no melody in the song, and the words were vague and meaningless; Diane's eyes, always dull, were no brighter for her pleasure; but she hugged the feathery doll and crooned to it all the way home. In the morning Cynthia Crittenden woke Marcy to tell her that Diane had passed away quietly in the night.

Marcy, after the first shock of surprise, thought better of God. At least He had let Diane have one more good time before He took her.

But she found herself deeply stirred by the sudden manner of the taking. It seemed but a few minutes since she had heard Diane singing to the gaudy doll. Marcy looked warily at Aunty, as was

her habit nowadays; was her "humor" good enough to warrant asking questions? What was death like, creeping upon Diane there in her own warm bed at home, right in among all her dolls and books and dishes and elaborate games? "Do you reckon she was scared, Aunty?" Marcy ventured at last.

Cynthia shook her head. "She died in her sleep. She didn't suffer at all. Oh, she's much better off, Marcy—so much better off! Would we were all as lucky." Cynthia's mouth twitched. "And, Marcy, when you go to get my medicine today, I want you to be sure and tell Dr. Trumbull how sorry we all are. Poor old man, I suppose it's a relief in a way, but he'll be heartbroken none the less, human nature being what it is. We're all fools." She rose from the bedside and began to brush her hair.

Marcy was acutely uncomfortable at the idea of offering condolence to Dr. Trumbull. She was more at her ease with him than with most adults, but even with him she found it difficult to talk freely.

Aunt, however, apparently realized this and was not going to let her off. "You'll have to, Marcy," she went on, as though she had read Marcy's mind. "It's time you learned to forget yourself and think of other people a little bit. God knows I'm hardly the one to teach you that. But you don't want to be like me, do you? Think of poor Dr. Trumbull, that's all, and just tell him we're all so sorry. And you tell him, too, do you hear me? Without fail."

Marcy nodded. "Will he be in his office today?"

"He sent me word early this morning that he'd be there from ten to eleven. It's Saturday, so you can go all right. Get up now and let me dress you."

This was one department of life in which Cynthia had not changed. She was as fiercely jealous as ever of anything done for Marcy by anyone else, even Marcy herself. Marcy missed the feeling of increased comradeship and intimacy that had formerly accompanied the dressing and undressing, but the ritual was gone through as carefully and elaborately as ever.

Dr. Trumbull was sitting at his desk. He was not working. He

sat motionless in his chair, his white head drooping and his veined hands lying quiet on his knees.

He looked up as Marcy hesitantly opened the office door. "Good morning, my dear. It's all right; come in."

Marcy advanced timidly to the desk and set Aunty's medicine bottle down upon it. "Aunt said—" She swallowed hard. "Aunt said tell you how s-sorry we all are about—about Diane." The word "Diane" was a whisper.

Dr. Trumbull nodded heavily. "Yes; I'm all broke up. All broke up."

He rose abruptly and turned away, the bottle in his hand; filling it, he spilled the lumpy crystals all about him. Even in the midst of her perturbation Marcy was conscious of an impelling desire to gather them up, to snatch them into hiding and carry them off against the hour of need. "All broke up," Dr. Trumbull said again, breaking the spell of this impotent desire.

Marcy did not know what to answer. It did not seem right to go until he spoke again.

But Dr. Trumbull only stood and looked out at the window. Suddenly a film of moisture dimmed his glasses; he took them off and wiped them, and became aware of her again. "I know," he said thickly, nodding. "very kind. Tell your aunt and your grandmother I thank them, but I'm an old man, and it won't be long before I can go, too. 'Swift to its close'—ah, poor Diane! Poor Diane!"

Marcy made a supreme effort. "Grandma says if there's anything we can do——"

He nodded. "I know. I know. I appreciate it. You run along now, Marcy."

Marcy gladly availed herself of this permission. But the thought of Dr. Trumbull's following Diane was a new specter to haunt her. What would Aunty do for her medicine then?

Marcy was child enough to take all Dr. Trumbull's kindnesses to herself very much for granted, and indeed it was pretty well

understood that these were offered partly as inducements to her to continue putting up with Diane. The thought of his death was unconnected in her mind with any personal regret; she had room for only one thought so far as Dr. Trumbull was concerned. Now that life itself hung upon Aunt's getting her medicine when she needed it, and Dr. Trumbull was the only one who could give it to her, what would they do if he died? And he was an old man. She had heard Aunt say that he was older than Grandma.

She felt an obscure resentment because Dr. Trumbull had seemed to look forward to dying. "It won't be long before I can go, too," he had said, as though it were a picnic or a party. And Aunt in her bad spells was always crying out for death to come and take her. Even Grandma had been known to mutter distractedly, "How long, O Lord? How long?"

Grandmother Peake? No, Grandmother Peake would never say anything like that—not while there was anything left to wonder about. Grandmother Peake would probably laugh at Dr. Trumbull and Aunt and Grandma for wanting to die. "Or pretending to want to," she would add with comfortable skepticism. "That kind of talk can always be taken with a grain of salt, Marcy."

Marcy, nearing home, sighed in mingled exasperation and bewilderment. Anyhow, her disagreeable errand of condolence was over, and she had got through it creditably enough. Her spirits rose a little as she turned in at the front gate.

Aunt was waiting for her on the veranda. "Did you give Dr. Trumbull my message?" she asked as she carried the bottle indoors and took her usual dose.

Marcy followed her in. "Yes. He said tell you thank you."

Mrs. Crittenden, wan and wordless, was standing in the deep bay of the library window; a sleepless night had left its marks upon her. "Alan Trumbull's a good man," she said suddenly, her voice hollow with fatigue. "He was mighty good to that poor little Diane. He'll never have anything to reproach himself with."

Abruptly her chin began to tremble; her childlike old face crumpled with tears. "The dear Lord knows I tried," she breathed unsteadily, beating her little hands together. "O blessed Lord, have mercy! Nevertheless, not my will——"

"Ma! What's the matter? Are you sick?" Cynthia demanded sharply. She grasped Mrs. Crittenden's arm and helped her to a chair. "Shall I send for Trumbull?"

Mrs. Crittenden wiped her streaming eyes. "No—no—not sick. Oh, Daught, my children—my little baby children!" Her voice was the wail of a small dying animal, lost and alone in the dark. "What did I do to hurt them, that they . . . Three of the smartest children, three of the prettiest, smartest little things . . . I must have done something wrong, Daught! I must have sinned against you all! God wouldn't punish me all my life for nothing. Not all my life, not all my lifetime long!" She bent forward as if in spasm.

Cynthia drew a long, hard breath. "You married Pa," she retorted grimly, "and then didn't have the gumption to stand up to him; that's all. Aside from that, you did what you could; and all of us were as guilty of that as you were. There's no sense in blaming yourself. And for God's sake—since you think so much of God—don't be superstitious about it, or don't talk that way before me, at least. I can't stand it, that's all. I can't stand it." She began to pace the floor. "You're right about the boys. Jay is smart, and Mark was as smart as anybody that ever lived. They could both have been bigger men than this town ever heard of. I don't know what Pa did to them, or by what devil's cleverness he figured out how to do it, but I do know in reason that he found some way to cripple them both, just as he crippled me. If your so-called God has any justice in Him, Pa is roasting in hell this minute. Yes, I mean every word of it"—as Mrs. Crittenden cried out in protest—"every word! If it hadn't been for his selfishness, his two-for-a-penny political ambitions, his struts and his flourishes and his cocky, arrogant, bullheaded determination to run everything his own way in spite of hell and high water——" Cynthia twitched her

braid over her shoulder and suddenly laughed, bitterly. "Don't you worry about Pa in hell. He'll be right at home; they recognize quality there! What would they do with him in heaven, where beggars and darkies can go with the best?"

Marcy had stood rooted to the floor throughout this scene, and now her aunt whirled round to face her. "Well?" she demanded with sardonic humor. "A quiet, cheery home life and a sense of family security—that's what the growing child requires, isn't it, Marcy? How do you like your share?"

Marcy crooked her arm over her eyes and burst into nervous tears. But she did not move from her tracks. She could no longer run to Auntie, who no longer made her feel free to do so. She dared not run from the room, lest Auntie misunderstand and lose her temper again.

"Oh, good God Almighty," Cynthia groaned. "I reckon you're right after all, Ma; there must be a God. I can't seem to help calling on Him myself. Marcy, for heaven's sake, hush crying. Look what you started, Ma. All we need is Reine in here howling." Recklessly she unscrewed the cap of the red bottle and took another dose of her medicine. "Where is that dog, anyhow? Reine! Here, Reine!"

"You sent her out in the yard a while ago," Mrs. Crittenden reminded her, wiping her swollen eyes.

"I meant to call her in. She's about past going, poor old girl. I won't have her put away, though. Listen! I thought I heard her whine." She crossed over to the window and pulled the curtain aside. "Yes, there she is on the porch. Why, she's got her foot caught!"

She hurried out to the veranda, Marcy and Mrs. Crittenden following her. "Poor old Reine! How long have you been standing here this way?"

Reine waited patiently at the entrance. The decaying end of a board in the veranda floor had broken under her forepaw and caught her leg in a crack.

Cynthia's rage returned upon her, crimsoning her ashen face.

She bent and pulled with all her strength at the broken board, wrenching it violently free and flinging it aside. "There!" she panted as Reine drew her forepaw free. "Now we can be open and honest about it and let everybody in town see we're paupers. The Crittenden house has a hole in it, Pa; how do you like that?" She breathed hard. "For two cents I'd set fire to the damned thing and burn it down to the ground."

"Daught!" cried Mrs. Crittenden in horror.

"I would," Cynthia maintained, regaining her self-control, "only it seems hardly worth while, with Pa safely out of it. Come here, Reine, you clumsy old idiot. Let's have a look at your paw."

The impact of these outbursts upon Marcy was scarcely lessened by repetition. She could not accustom herself to seeing Aunt, who had tended her all her life so lovingly, turn upon her with anger or sarcasm or derision.

Moreover, Cynthia's tirades in themselves were shocking. It was unheard of for a woman—especially a woman of the Crittenden caste—to swear, and her occasional slight profanity rang upon the startled ears of her family like the very crackling of infernal flames.

And the outbursts were more and more frequent. On the days when Marcy went to Dr. Trumbull's office for the drug, her suspense until she drew near enough to see whether or not the door bore its sinister placard was so intense that its relaxation left her actually weak. She had literally to drag herself up the long flight of stairs and into Dr. Trumbull's presence.

And if the placard fluttered on the door . . .

There were good days, too, of course. Once or twice she saw Aunt look at her in a way that suggested the old fondness, but at the first hint of response she was aloof again. It was as though she did not trust herself to love Marcy, lest the inevitable hour when she could love no more prove too much for the child to bear.

Marcy, of course, did not carry analysis so far. At first she was

half dazed with astonishment that such things could happen and the world go on. Time passed, however, and the miraculous human power of psychic adaptation did its work; after a few weeks she no longer cried out under her misfortunes, even within herself. The world would not after all, it seemed, come to an end even if Auntie were suffering or mad; even if Auntie died; even if Marcy herself died, as Diane had done.

"Nobody ever notices much, do they, Auntie?" she ventured one afternoon, unconsciously longing for Cynthia to "talk to her" as she had once done.

Cynthia paused in her work of dusting the dresser. "How do you mean?"

"I mean——" Marcy struggled for expression. "Like when you die. You know."

Miss Crittenden laughed, a little queerly. "That's right. You've learned one of the first lessons of life, Marcy."

"If you're great," Marcy continued, "like Shakespeare or—or Mark Twain?"

"Then you'll be remembered a little longer," Cynthia conceded.

Marcy was puzzled; a little longer? "You said Shakespeare was three hundred years ago, Auntie."

Cynthia admitted it. "In the light of eternity, Marcy, three hundred years isn't much. Four or five lifetimes, that's all. Still, if you can make yourself remembered that long for anything worth doing, you might as well spend your life that way as any other. Are you thinking of leaving a few footprints on the sands of time?"

Marcy colored and was silent. Auntie, as usual, had read her inmost thoughts.

Cynthia smiled. "Never mind, Marcy. I didn't mean to laugh at you. Think about it if you want to, and do it if you can. It's all right with me." She shook her dusting cloth out at the open window and left the room.

Marcy, alone, turned a doubtful introspective eye upon her potentialities for greatness. There was something she wanted, wanted, wanted all the time now that she no longer had Aunt. She did not know what it was. There were moments, more and more frequent, when something seemed about to tell her; when there appeared a rift in the solid wall of fact, and intuition looked through at her, beckoning. These were moments of supernal and breath-taking beauty. Sitting in her swing and looking idly at an ordinary poplar tree across the garden, she would suddenly see its leaves fringed round with celestial light, its boughs pouring upward forever, far past the visible sky. It no longer looked like a tree. It looked the way a tree might look that had gone to heaven and now grew flaming beside the throne of God.

This archetypal tree, or flower, or hill, or church spire—for it might be any of these, or an acorn, for that matter, or the golden titles of books in the circular glow of a candle—filled Marcy, even after its disappearance, with the strange, new, unexplained yearning that Aunt's defection had left in her orphaned heart. Once, in desperation, she had appealed to Grandma, explaining how she felt in the hope of obtaining light; but Grandma, jumping instantly to the conclusion that Marcy was "under conviction of sin," had nearly sent for the Methodist minister to talk with her. Indeed, she might actually have done so if Mrs. Peake had not been calling at the time. That realistic matron, hearing of Marcy's symptoms, called the child to her for further examination. "Your grandma says you have a funny feeling, Marcy. Come here a minute; let's see your tongue. Nothing wrong there. Where is the feeling—in your stomach or in your back?"

"I—I feel all right now," stammered Marcy, scarlet with mortification.

"Nothing but a touch of indigestion, probably," Mrs. Peake concluded briskly.

Marcy, only too glad to save her face by accepting this diagnosis, had escaped to her swing under the paradise tree. Her heart

burned again with shame and rage as she remembered it; she would know better, another time, than to try to tell anybody anything like that!

She thought of Grandpa. He had probably been hiding somewhere out of sight, laughing at her. Everybody probably laughed at her all the time. Auntie had laughed at her just a few minutes ago, even if she had said she didn't mean to. There was nobody to be with Marcy any more. She was all alone.

How often, nowadays, those words came back to her! They were not new words. "Alone, alone, all, all alone!" Auntie had read her from *The Ancient Mariner*, and in happier days Pansy's songs, resounding over the washtub, had abounded in complaints of loneliness and desolation: "Look down, look down that lonesome road," and "You got to walk down a lonesome valley." But Marcy had never known before what loneliness really meant.

Now she knew. It was not when you moped about the house and sulked because you could not go and play with Inez. It was not even when you stood upstairs at the window in the night, beside the bed you and Auntie used to share, and watched Auntie wandering half mad through the garden, forgetting you ever existed. It was when you looked at Auntie and Inez and Grandma and Grandmother Peake and Dr. Trumbull and found out that none of them, not a single one, really had anything to do with you, yourself, Marcy Crittenden, a person alive yet alone. Alone on a wide, wide sea. No; Marcy was an inland child; she knew nothing of the sea. Alone in a wide, wide world, she amended the poem in her mind.

Dusk was falling. She went out into the garden. Cynthia, who had been raking dead leaves into a great pile near the old carriage drive, flung down her rake and surveyed the heap speculatively. Marcy forgot her inward searchings. "Are you going to make a bonfire, Auntie?" she called eagerly.

"I thought I might," Cynthia answered. "It's a good evening for a little devil-worship." She bent and touched a lighted match

to the pile. Her white face in the instant flare of light was sardonic, truly for a moment diabolical; she laughed.

Marcy stared at her, fascinated. She had never heard of devil-worship, but the idea excited her, as all Cynthia's fantastic notions did. And in spite of her recent conversion Marcy had an open mind. She was no hidebound bigot. "How do you do it, Aunty?" she inquired with lively interest.

"You'll never know." Cynthia laughed again. "Unless, maybe, you ask Mittie Henley one of these days. She has me riding on a broomstick out to the graveyard and back every time the moon's at the full. Or so I understand."

The bonfire flamed high between them. Cynthia's musing, secret smile was mysterious with more than Marcy's eyes could see. There was something about Aunty that nobody had ever got near.

Marcy, straining hard toward understanding, reaching with all her being for the offered clue, had one of her stabbing moments of perception; there was something about Aunty—there was something about Aunty . . .

There was something about Aunty that nobody had ever got near, and she had given it to Marcy. It was there now within Marcy this minute, the insatiable, unknowable, inescapable desire, burning like a bonfire in her breast.

—23—

MRS. CRITTENDEN tried surreptitiously to replace the broken board in the veranda floor, but she could not make it secure, and after Marcy, coming in from school one afternoon, had tripped over it and shaved a considerable area of skin from her leg, Cynthia tore it up again and threw it into the library fireplace.

She was furious with Marcy for having hurt herself; it was one of her bad days. "Why can't you look where you're going?" she

stormed. "Of all the helpless, clumsy, two-year-old babies I ever saw in my life you're the worst. And stop that sniffing. I don't care if it does hurt. Stand still so I can fix it. Stand still, I tell you!"

Her unsteady hands had trouble with the bandage; it brushed against the floor, and she dropped it. "Oh, God," she snapped as she reached for a fresh one. "There. No. Now the tape's all gone. Go upstairs and get me the rest of the spool. And hold that bandage on, do you hear me? I'm not going to fix it again."

Marcy, tearfully holding the bandage in place, started up the stairs in the painful and ridiculous posture her aunt's command made necessary. Halfway up, however, she could maintain it no longer; her hand trembled and slipped, and the bandage unrolled and dropped away. She halted in her tracks, looking helplessly down at the waiting fury below.

Cynthia's whole body quivered, but she controlled herself. "I thought so," she said with deceptive quietness. "Pick it up, and go get that tape."

When the shrinking child returned she seized the injured leg and bound it up with the haste of barely controlled rage, turning the little girl roughly about and about. "Always something!" she gritted as she finished. "If it hadn't been for you and your cry-baby helplessness I'd have been out of the whole mess long ago."

From Marcy's stricken face she knew at once that she had dealt the child a mortal blow, but the knowledge only increased her anger. She moved as though she would strike Marcy. "Go on outdoors," she ordered, as she might have spoken to Reine. "Go on out of here."

Marcy, feeling as though she were bleeding to death inside, obeyed. What did Auntie expect of her? To go of her own accord and live with Grandmother Peake, so that Auntie could—

No! No! No! It was too much. She could not bear it. She remembered the time Auntie had set fire to the brown robe, the time after time she had tried to do violence upon herself in other ways, the nights of waking and watching lest she find a convenient

instrument of self-destruction. Marcy could not go away and live somewhere else and be thinking all the time, every minute of the day, that Auntie might be killing herself right now, this minute! And Godfrey Peake there all the time, his sharp, spectacled eyes piercing her to the marrow of her bones, his sneering mouth telling her, even when he did not speak, that he loathed the sight of her. . . .

Marcy went out and sat down in her swing. Her thoughts, mixed wildly with the pain in her leg and the infinitely greater pain in her heart, were incoherent. At Grandmother Peake's she would not be Marcy Crittenden any longer; in everything but name she would have to be Marcy Peake. Maybe even that would be changed; Grandmother Peake had always resented her not having been named for her mother. Maybe she would call her Agnes Peake. And certainly in every other way her life would be turned upside down. Grandmother Peake would be only too glad of an opportunity to reverse all Auntie's policies, if only for the sake of the last-word satisfaction in which her soul delighted.

In this conclusion Marcy was less than just to Mrs. Peake, who was sincerely concerned for her little granddaughter's welfare and honestly held Cynthia Crittenden in dereliction of duty because she had failed to teach Marcy to "do for herself." But the thinly veiled civil warfare between the two families could have had no other logical result. Marcy felt herself a Crittenden to the core, and both her terror of Godfrey and her discomfort under the critical and appraising scrutiny of her Grandmother Peake intensified this feeling.

When on the following Sunday she went to call on Mrs. Peake as usual, she was so pale and silent that her observant hostess noticed it at once.

"What's the matter, Marcy? Not sick, are you?" she inquired finally, at the dinner table, seeing that Marcy had scarcely touched her dessert.

Marcy shook her head. "I'm all right."

Godfrey pushed back his plate. "Don't they teach young ones to say 'Yes, ma'am,' and 'No, ma'am,' any more?" he snarled. "Or is a Crittenden so far above that sort of thing that it doesn't matter?" He dropped his napkin on the table and left the room.

Mrs. Peake chuckled propitiatingly. "It would be nicer, Marcy, if you said 'Yes, Grandmother.' Don't you think so?"

"Yes, Grandmother," Marcy whispered, ready to cry. It was not that she hadn't any manners; she knew how to talk as well as the next one! But with Godfrey there . . . She felt miserably that she had failed Auntie. She had given a wrong impression of her careful training, and Grandmother Peake was already using it to justify her attitude toward the Crittenden family.

Marcy felt a frantic impulse to hold her throbbing head together, for it seemed as though it would rock apart. Everything in the world was wrong and lopsided; nothing was safe, nothing was steady. Auntie didn't love her any more—her heart swelled nearly to bursting every time this intolerable realization struck home—and she could never please Grandmother Peake, never, never, never. There was nobody else she could turn to. Grandma was as helpless as herself. She was all alone. God Himself probably despised her for not knowing what to do; but she didn't, she didn't, and she had nobody anywhere to tell her.

She wandered upstairs as usual and spent a dreary afternoon on the top landing. As she came downstairs to go home she heard her name spoken and halted. A prickly discomfort at being so often discussed, almost to her face, came over her. She did not want to listen, but the sound of her name held her in spite of herself.

"Marcy's found out about Cynthia," Mrs. Peake was announcing to Godfrey. "I know it as well as if she'd told me."

Godfrey polished his glasses with his handkerchief. "Well, I suppose she had to find it out sooner or later."

"I suppose so." Mrs. Peake settled back in her chair. "But it's awful," she added a few moments later. "Poor child!"

Godfrey did not reply.

"I suppose there's nothing we can do about it," his mother ventured, somewhat timidly for her.

"Not unless they turn her loose first. I'm not going to have her running back and forth, first here and then there. If she's coming here, she's got to come to stay, so you can put a little sense and gumption into her. If she's got any place to put it."

"Oh, Marcy's smart enough," Mrs. Peake remonstrated. "At least, she's always at the top of her class in school." She meditated for a time. "I was sorry for her today, anyway. It must have been a terrible shock to her, Godfrey."

"You don't even know for sure that that was what ailed her," Godfrey pointed out.

"I'm positive of it," said his positive mother.

Marcy, reaching home, walked carefully around the gap in the veranda floor. Mrs. Crittenden sat in a wicker chair under the nearly leafless wistaria vine, motionless in the fading light. The new *Christian Herald* lay open on her lap, but she was not reading.

"Well, honey-pie," she said, trying to smile as Marcy approached. "How was your Grandmother Peake?"

Marcy found even this morsel of affection and kindness somewhat reviving. "All right," she said. She looked from the hole in the floor to the fanlight above the front entrance. "Look, Grandma," she pointed out. "That thing over the door shakes if I jiggle up and down."

Mrs. Crittenden glanced upward. "Better not jiggle up and down, then, honey." She sighed. "I'm going to see if Jay can't have a few repairs done on the house," she murmured.

"Where's Auntie?" Marcy inquired hesitantly.

"Upstairs, lying down. She feels bad, honey. Don't bother her." Mrs. Crittenden sighed again.

Marcy imagined Auntie lying alone upstairs, her cold hands clenched on the counterpane, the bones almost showing through

the skin. Aunty "felt bad" most of the time nowadays, and she had grown so thin and white and transparent and tremulous that no great stretch of the imagination was needed to see her lying dead. Marcy had never seen a dead person. She had not been permitted to attend Diane Trumbull's funeral. But since Diane's passing the subject of death had had for her a chill and foreboding fascination. On one of Aunty's good days she had asked for the rest of *Adonais* and had found a new source of wonder and awe in her first encounter with the profundities of grief and bereavement. And indeed the poem did not lose in power by Cynthia's too-eloquent reading.

"Peace, peace, he is not dead, he doth not sleep!" she declaimed with passion.

*He hath awakened from the dream of life.
'Tis we who, lost in stormy visions, keep
With phantoms an unprofitable strife,
And in mad trance strike with our spirit's knife
Invulnerable nothings. We decay
Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief
Convulse us and consume us day by day,
And cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay.*

Remembering these lines, Marcy could see dimly, like something afar off, why Aunty might want to be "out of it all." But what of her, Marcy, who would have nobody left if Aunty were not there?

Somewhere in her consciousness there dawned her first conception of a love great enough to let go, to make no demands, to be utterly forgetful of self; but of course it was no more than a brushing of the finger tip of intuition, disappearing as quickly as it had come. Marcy realized that Grandma had spoken to her.

"What did you say, Grandma?"

"I said it looks a little like rain." Mrs. Crittenden scanned the yellowish-gray evening sky. "We've had so much rain this fall. I must go look after my chickens."

INEZ CAME over the following Saturday morning. "What you goin' to give Christine for her birthday today?" she inquired of Marcy. "I'm goin' to give her a little workbasket. With a pink silk lining."

"Christine?" Marcy was puzzled. "You mean Christine Wilson?"

Inez bristled. "Well, she's the only one goin' to have a birthday party today, isn't she?" But seeing that Marcy still looked blank, she lost her truculence and stared in simple wonder. "Didn't you know she was goin' to have a party?"

Marcy hesitated. She had not known, and she was stricken cold from head to foot. That any "nice" little girl in town should have a birthday party and not invite all the other "nice" little girls was utterly beyond belief. Such a thing had never been known to happen. And to slight a Crittenden, of all others!

Marcy could not speak. She could not even shake her head. She stood looking at Inez without a motion or a sound.

A quick footstep caused both little girls to turn. Cynthia Crittenden stood in the doorway. Her face was the color of burned-out ashes, but she smiled. "Marcy hasn't decided about Christine's present yet," she said smoothly. "We're going to town and get it after a while. Marcy, you and Inez play half an hour or so, and then you'll have to get dressed and come with me."

She shot her niece a sharply warning glance. "I'll call you when I'm ready to go." She left the room abruptly.

Inez, though her face had betrayed momentary doubt, was quickly convinced; Marcy had had her invitation and was just tryin' to act like she didn't have a lick of sense, the way Inez had so often known her to do. "Well, what we goin' to play?" she demanded. "We only got a half an hour."

Marcy pulled herself together. "I don't care. Anything you want to."

She followed Inez almost blindly through the game of "house" that occupied the endless thirty minutes of waiting. Her dread of Cynthia's anger had entirely eclipsed, at least for the time being, her humiliation at not having been asked to the party. Auntie blamed everybody for everything nowadays when she was "feeling bad." Marcy expected a bitter berating for not having been invited to Christine's party, for not having answered Inez independently, and for not having acted with more spirit upon her aunt's obvious cue.

She had no expectation whatever of what she encountered. Cynthia Crittenden was dressed for the street; her heavy hair was bound about her head, and she stood at the dresser upstairs in the south bedroom, counting a handful of small change. She did not look up as Marcy, who, wishing to know the worst and have it over, had run all the way from the far front garden at her call, appeared breathless in the doorway. "Go ask Ma to wash your hands and face," was all she said.

Marcy obeyed, her mind in a whirl. What was Auntie going to do? Not actually buy a present for Christine? Not actually make Marcy go to the party anyway?

Marcy's blood froze. She remembered Cynthia's ruthlessness about her prize copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She couldn't go to Christine's party without being invited; who ever heard of such a thing? Walk up to the Wilsons' front door, and give Christine a present, and have Mrs. Wilson look at her strangely, perhaps even send her home? Hear the other girls whispering to each other about her? For, of course, Christine would have told them. Marcy

could hear her, in a tone gritty with triumphant spite: "Hey, kids, c'mere. What do you think? I'm goin' to have a birthday party 'n' I'm not goin' to even invite that old Marcy Crittenden. Mamma says I don't haf to if I don't want to."

Oh, no, no. Aunty surely would not do a thing like that to her. "Grandma," she ventured as Mrs. Crittenden finished straightening her dress and smoothing her hair, "what's Aunty going to do?"

"I don't know, honey." Mrs. Crittenden sighed. "She's not herself, or she wouldn't waste a thought on anything Kitty Wilson or her children could do. You'll just have to be a good girl and do whatever she tells you to. She's not a bit well. There. She's calling you."

Cynthia glanced briefly at the child as she came back into the bedroom. "I'd like to know what you'd do with yourself if I didn't carry you through life on a down pillow like a baby," she said coldly. "You never have a word to say for yourself. Now this is the last time I'm going to help you out, do you hear? You're big enough to look out for yourself a little." She picked up her purse and once more counted the several pieces of change it contained. "Where's your pride, that you'll stand still and take a thing like this from that little fly-up-the-creek of a Christine Wilson? Why, her mother's father, old Bollweevil Trimble, used to clean out stables and privies for a living; people used to cross the street when they saw him coming. If Kitty hadn't managed to catch Nat Wilson nobody in this town that is anybody would so much as speak to her. You've got no gumption, Marcy. A person would think there wasn't a drop of Crittenden blood——"

She checked herself, flushing with self-accusation. That, after her bitter experience, she should say such a thing to the child! She spoke somewhat more gently. "Well, come along."

Marcy swallowed. "Where, Aunty?" she managed to say.

"To the store, of course, to buy Christine a birthday present for you to take to the party. Now don't start arguing, Marcy. It won't do you a bit of good. I'm going with you to the party, and

you don't have to stay. But you're going, and you're going to hear Kitty Wilson say she invited you. Now what do you want me to buy? A hair ribbon?"

Marcy gulped miserably and nodded.

"What color?"

"I don't care." Marcy hastily corrected herself. "I mean, any color."

Cynthia tightened her lips and said no more. They went to the store, and she bought a length of wide blue moire ribbon, asking that it be wrapped in tissue paper. She seemed unconscious of the stir her presence made in the store, but Marcy felt it acutely. All the gifts would have been bought here, of course; everybody in town would soon know that there was something funny about Christine Wilson's birthday party in connection with the Crittendens. And, Christine being Christine, it would not be long, either, before everybody in town knew exactly what it was.

At home once more, Marcy moped throughout the morning, desperately hoping against hope that something would happen to prevent this catastrophe. But nothing did. At two o'clock in the afternoon she was arrayed in her best and escorted by a grimly silent Cynthia down the brick walk and out of the sheltering garden, onward, onward, onward to her doom.

Kitty Wilson, Christine's mother, met them at the door. Her blinking eyes, pale like Christine's, and her rabbitlike twitching nose betrayed her nervousness, nay even her actual fright, as her white-faced, white-lipped neighbor confronted her at the threshold. "Why—why, good afternoon, Miss—Miss Cynth—Miss Crittenden, I mean! Won't you—won't you come in?" She cast an apprehensive glance over her shoulder at a flutter of children's white dresses in the parlor. "Maybe we could just step in here to the sitting room; it's more— You see, I was just about to—I was just—"

Cynthia smiled. "Thank you, no, I won't come in," she replied suavely. "I heard this morning about Christine's birthday party,

and thinking perhaps that Marcy's invitation had got lost in the mail——"

Mrs. Wilson leaped gratefully at this straw. "Now, what do you think of that?" she cried in loud relief. "I declare, the mail is terrible these days. I wouldn't have had that happen for anything. I'm so glad you brought her. You come right in, Marcy. And that's a present for Christine? Well, how lovely." She looked over her shoulder. "Christine! Come here, dear."

But Cynthia intervened. "I'm sorry. Marcy will not be able to stay, either; I need her this afternoon. We came only to bring her present to Christine and to let you know of this unfortunate slip about the invitation." She looked down tolerantly, from her greater height, at the flustered Mrs. Wilson. "I'm glad to know it was the mails; I thought it just might have been an oversight on your part. Your father, I remember, was very absent-minded; no doubt it came from his work and from being by himself so much." She took Marcy's hand, smiling. "We must go now. Good afternoon."

She turned away, and Marcy followed her, leaving Mrs. Wilson slack-jawed and seething at the door. Cynthia's expression, now that she had turned her back on her interlocutor, was once more grim, but her eyes held a dreadful fatigue, as though the effort of the encounter had been too much for her.

She did not say a word as they walked back home. Arrived there, she held the front door open for Marcy and went straight upstairs.

Marcy trailed dumbly after her, not knowing what else to do. At the door of the south bedroom Cynthia turned and glanced at her. "Ma," she suddenly called. "Will you come here a minute?"

Mrs. Crittenden, already upstairs, appeared at once. "What is it, Daught? Are you sick?"

Cynthia nodded; she even smiled. "Sick and tired, Ma. I'm going to bed—for good. I want you to take all Marcy's things out of here; I want this room for myself. You can fix the little west room for her. I've fought my last battle, for her or anything else. It's a

losing fight any way you take it. The family's going to the dogs, and there's nothing I can do to stop it." She began taking off her dress. "I put a flea in Kitty Wilson's ear—she'll not slight Marcy again in a hurry—but I lowered myself when I went there and well I know it. Everybody in town will be buzzing about it by night, and it's only a question of time before they all wake up to the fix we're in. I'm past caring one way or the other, except I wish Pa could have been in at the death. You'll just have to do the best you can from now on; I'm through." She turned to look at her little niece, who was still standing in the doorway. "Marcy," she said quietly, "come here to me."

Marcy advanced, dreading she knew not what; there was a look in Cynthia's eyes that she had never seen there.

"Marcy," Miss Crittenden said slowly and distinctly, "I want you to go downstairs now, and stay there. Do you understand? Stay there. I don't want you to come in here any more or even to come upstairs any more except to change your clothes or go to bed. And when you do come, come up the front stairs, not the back; I don't want to be disturbed. Do you hear me?"

Marcy nodded, her chin trembling; Aunt's voice was so strange! "Do you mean all day today, Aunt?" she faltered at length.

"I mean all day today, and all day tomorrow, and every day from now on. I don't want you to come in here any more. Not at all. Do you understand now?"

Mrs. Crittenden started forward in alarm and dismay. "Why, Daught! You'll break the child's heart! She——"

Cynthia interrupted her, spacing her words distinctly: "I—don't—want—to—see—her—again. That's clear enough, isn't it?" Her anger broke forth. "I can't stand it; what do you think I'm made of? I can't stand the sight of her. Now get out of here, both of you. Get out! Get out!" She moved toward them, her hands clenched. "Get out, before I—oh, God!" She flung herself down on the bed. "Can't you see—can't you see——"

Mrs. Crittenden laid a shaking hand on Marcy's shoulder. "You run on downstairs, honey-pie, and don't feel bad. She didn't mean it. You run on downstairs; that's right. Daught," she continued as Marcy, in terror, obeyed, "try to get hold of yourself, honey. I know you don't feel good, but you must think of the baby. Why, you never spoke to her like that in her life; she'll cry herself sick. Now you just go to bed and have a good rest——"

"Oh, God," Cynthia Crittenden moaned against the shabby pillow. "Oh, God, oh God, oh God! Will you *please* get out? It's the end, I tell you. It's the end!"

Mrs. Crittenden hesitated a moment, shaking her head; then she sighed heavily and went slowly downstairs.

— 25 —

IF MARCY had been older she might have been greatly surprised at the realization that the undomestic Cynthia, after all, had been the one to hold things together in the Crittenden household. Mrs. Crittenden had no "faculty for managing." Accustomed to depend upon her daughter for all executive decisions, she floundered hopelessly at first amid the bewildering responsibilities of keeping house singlehanded and looking after a nine-year-old child.

Both she and Marcy had been half stunned to discover that Cynthia had apparently meant every word of what she had told them on the day of Christine Wilson's birthday party. After a week of pleading and horrified weeping, a week of toiling upstairs with heavy trays and carrying them down an hour later almost as heavy, Mrs. Crittenden in her agitation had sent for Dr. Trumbull. But Cynthia would not see him; she locked her door against him.

He came back downstairs with a heavy frown between his

brows. "I'm sorry, Jeanie," he said. "Bitterly sorry. If there were anything on earth I could do to help you, you know I'd do it. But she won't listen to me. She won't even let me talk to her. I know in reason she's not following my orders about that morphine, or she wouldn't be in the state she's in. Her allowance is small, but it's sufficient—or would be if she'd take it the way I told her to." He crossed the room and picked up his stick from the chair on which it lay. "Maybe if you got Jay to talk to her——"

Mrs. Crittenden took off her glasses and wiped her eyes. Her hands trembled. "Jay's not here, Doctor. He's not in town. He had to go to St. Louis."

"Well, when he comes back." Trumbull hesitated. "What are you going to do about——" He motioned with his head toward Marcy, who sat dismally with Reine at the window in the next room, doing nothing. "Hadn't you better let her go to Mrs. Peake?"

Mrs. Crittenden winced. "She's—she's all I've got left, Doctor."

"I know." Trumbull laid a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. "You've got a hard row to hoe, Jeanie. A hard row to hoe. Well, any time I can be of any use to you, no matter how or what, don't you hesitate to call on me. I'll send Cynthia her medicine when the time comes. Good-by. Good-by, Marcy."

Marcy, remembering this conversation after four heartbroken weeks of isolation, felt dully that she too had a hard row to hoe. The inner stability upon which a child's world depends had crumbled, and the earth all but rocked beneath her feet. Terrible beyond all imagining though it was to recall that Auntie did not want to see her ever again, that she could not stand the sight of her, she went over and over the stabbing words in her mind. She heard them all day long, wherever she went. She could not play; she could not study; she could not read. Lying alone in bed in the little west room, hearing Cynthia pacing like a tigress up and down the bedchamber to the south and Reine whining hopelessly in the hall outside the locked door, she knew moments of baffled

envy of Reine, who could not know that hope was dead and that Auntie had barred her out forever. It was a good thing Reine was only a dog.

Or—was it? Suddenly Marcy had a moment of perception. To be a dog, tense and trembling with love and anxiety, and always to be halted at the very threshold of communication by that impenetrable wall which separates man from brute in spite of man's affection and brute's sacrificial devotion—no, that was not good, that was a terrible, terrible thing. "Poor old Reine," Marcy thought tenderly, and in that moment felt her stature rise. Was it this that Auntie had meant, and Dr. Trumbull too, when they wanted her to remember "the truth shall make you free"?

But of course. Herein lay the difference between them. Reine was a prisoner forever, and Marcy was free.

Yet free to what good purpose, in a world altered beyond recognition? Reine alone was faithfully the same; everything else was changed, even Grandma. The very meals were different. Mrs. Crittenden, deprived of Cynthia's spaciousness of outlook, Cynthia's savage determination to live decently in spite of anything a malignant fate might see fit to visit upon her, had grown nervously economical; trying to cook just enough at each meal for herself and Marcy and Cynthia (who ate almost nothing) she too frequently erred on the side of scantness, and she fell into the habit of serving meals in the kitchen. Marcy, accustomed to the bounty and grace of a table presided over by the uncompromising Cynthia, suffered in both mind and appetite.

Even school was beset with trouble this year. Marcy had been skipped from the fourth grade to the sixth, and her new teacher, a red-haired Miss Flossie Bee Reilly, for some reason resented and disliked her. At first Marcy was utterly bewildered; teachers always liked her! But there it was. The seal of permanence had been set upon the aversion almost as soon as she had been in the grade long enough for Miss Flossie Bee to learn her name.

"We'll write a business letter today," the teacher announced. "First we'll read the one in the book, and then we'll write one of

our own. Page thirty-five. We'll have it read aloud. Marcy—ah—Crittenden, you read it."

Marcy picked up her book and rose, smothering her quick resentment at Miss Flossie Bee's ironical emphasis of her surname. She never called Marcy by her first name alone; she always added the "Crittenden," with an intonation nobody could mistake.

"Page thirty-five," she prompted Marcy now. "Jones Reality Company——"

Marcy looked up, surprised. "It's 'Realty Company,' isn't it?" she asked timidly.

Miss Reilly's already florid face darkened. "So that's why we get skipped a grade," she remarked conversationally to the class. "Because we know so much more than the teachers."

The sixth grade laughed obligingly. Marcy colored and waited.

"Read it," Miss Flossie Bee commanded, "and read it the way I told you to. Jones Reality Company——"

Marcy gulped. "Jones—Jones Realty Company——"

Miss Flossie Bee banged her ruler on the desk. "Did you hear me or did you not?"

Marcy lifted despairing eyes. "I—I can't," she stammered. "There isn't any *i* in it."

Miss Flossie Bee looked her up and down. "Do tell! Sit down. Evelyn, you may read it, dear." She nodded and smiled at another little girl. "Maybe you'll be able to mind what your teacher tells you, even if you have taken a year to each grade." The class laughed again. "Sometimes we get ideas about ourselves and our smartness that are just a little bit too big for us. But just remember, class—sooner or later we're going to run across somebody that's a little bit smarter, even if it's only a teacher"—Miss Flossie Bee cast liberal sarcastic emphasis upon the "only," and the class roared with delight—"and they're going to show us right where we get off at, as we'll see when report cards come around. Go ahead, Evelyn."

Marcy, smarting under the double injustice of personal dis-

crimination and disregard of the rights of the matter, tried to unburden her hot heart to Grandma as she would formerly have done to Aunty. But Grandma was singularly obtuse.

"You must always mind your teacher, Marcy," she said gravely when the tale was told. "She knows best."

"But, Grandma——"

"A little girl like you mustn't set herself up against her teacher. When Grandma was a little girl she always minded. You be a good girl in school and learn your books and do just what your teacher tells you. You never had any trouble before. Why, honey-pie, your Aunty wouldn't know what to think of you."

Marcy subsided into the acquiescence of despair; Grandma must not have much sense! She never appealed to Mrs. Crittenden again, although this was but the first of a long series of similar incidents and her report card carried marks that no former teacher of hers could have believed. Miss Flossie Bee, returning one of her compositions with the flat comment "No grade. You copied that out of a book," had even threatened to "leave her back" at the end of the term.

Marcy was half frantic. That school should fail her! That a teacher should try to make her learn things wrong, accuse her of lying about her compositions, use such expressions as "do tell" and "where to get off at"! That Grandma, having been put in full possession of the facts, should take sides with Miss Flossie Bee against her!

Nor was this the full extent of Grandma's obtuseness. Grandma seemed not to know half the things that Marcy needed.

Probably she actually did not. There can be no question that Mrs. Crittenden loved her little granddaughter devotedly, but she had reached the years of abstraction and was bowed beneath a load almost too heavy for her endurance; moreover, she was still in a half-dazed condition of mind at Cynthia's desertion. Marcy's first overwhelming shock and grief had indeed received her tenderest sympathy, and the child's continuing apathy was a matter

of some anxiety to her, but many material things, some of them important, escaped her.

The little girl's appearance, for one thing, concerned her scarcely at all; and certainly Marcy, who had never been taught to handle even the simplest of her own personal problems, had no idea what to do or how to do it. Her long, fine, curly hair grew quickly rough and snarled. Trying to comb it herself, she got the comb tightly entangled in it and found her arms as well as her patience exhausted before she finally managed to pull it out. She fell into the habit of passing the brush over it a few times and letting it go at that. Gradually a matted tangle, increasing imperceptibly day after day, grew beneath the crumpled ribbon Grandma tied for her every morning at the nape of her neck.

Mrs. Crittenden never noticed this lump. Her obliviousness may have been an unconscious wish fulfillment, for on the one occasion when she had tried to dress Marcy's hair as Cynthia had done, both she and the child had wept with pain and fury.

Such other matters as teeth, ears, and fingernails fared, too, as best they might. Mrs. Crittenden vibrated between her kitchen and her chickens in the back garden, talking ceaselessly to her flock, to herself, to the departed Major, or to the Almighty. She was seldom off her feet, seeming to find herself, whenever she paused to rest, a prey to miserable memories. She hoarded everything, whether it was worth saving or not—odd buttons, infinitesimal lengths of string, old barrel hoops, matchboxes, empty cold-cream jars, corkless bottles, devitalized sponges. Her Bible was never out of her hands when she was still.

She did not sew; Marcy was fast outgrowing her dresses, and there seemed to be no prospect that she would get any others. Where now were the frills and flounces, the hand-embroidered undergarments, the hand-hemstitched guimpes and handkerchiefs and pinafores that had once been quickly forthcoming at Marcy's lightest need?

Marcy had never cared overmuch for such things, and she did

not miss them acutely. But she looked sadly different nowadays, and at school the frank Inez often desired her to say plainly, once for all, whether she was *ever* goin' to wear anything else but those ole wore-out dresses. "They're not even big enough," Inez pointed out.

She might have added that they were not always even clean. Mrs. Crittenden's eyes were failing her, and she had never rivaled Pansy as a laundress. Quite frequently Marcy, in need of a dress for school, took down a "clean" one from the line and put it on unironed.

Mrs. Peake, seeing her once on the street in such a dress, was too much scandalized to maintain her policy of noninterference. "That's disgraceful, Marcy," she said severely. "Iron it yourself if your grandma can't. You're plenty big enough. All my girls could iron at your age. Your mother would never have gone out looking like that."

Marcy, scarlet with humiliation, went home and tried to iron the dress, but she made sorry work of it. She lapsed back into the old habit, merely taking pains to avoid encountering her Grandmother Peake when she was wearing an unironed frock.

It was small wonder that Marcy looked upon Reine as the one point of constancy in a reeling world. The old dog's companionship was her sole external comfort. True, now that the first shock was over she still had her occasional moments of inward splendor, but these were of an intensity as disturbing as it was ecstatic; what did it mean, this leaping wish, this yearning? What was it Marcy wanted so much that her hands turned cold and her heart beat up in her throat?

The air was sharpened now with the coming of winter. Night after night, while the wild wind whistled through the cracks in the decaying house and Reine kept her patient vigil in the hall, Marcy lay watching the windy boughs tangle and untangle themselves in the gale, a shifting network of frenzy and amazement. Surely there was surprise in the startled way the trees flung them-

selves about, as though they too were pleading for an explanation. Where were their leaves, their burgeoning blossoms, their fruit?

They might just as well, thought Marcy, quit rocking and wailing. Nobody was ever going to come and tell them what was the matter. Nobody cared.

—26—

MRS. CRITTENDEN was less scrupulous than Cynthia had been about sending Marcy to visit at the Peakes', and often two or even three weeks went by without her paying this duty call. It was always a great relief to Marcy to escape, for, of course, she did not realize that the uncomfortable stiffness of her relations with her maternal grandmother were due to Mrs. Peake's own active discomfort at not being able to "take hold" when she saw things that disturbed her. Marcy felt only that her Grandmother Peake did not really like her, and she had now the additional knowledge, which she found anything but soothing, that her Grandmother Peake held her in actual disapprobation, nay more, in actual disgrace, because she couldn't iron.

When Mrs. Crittenden did remember to send her for the Sunday visit, she kept to herself as much as possible, moping; for there was as little as ever in the house to interest her, and on Sunday Godfrey was nearly always at home. Marcy did her best, within the limitations imposed by the fact that she was unquestionably a rather plump and solid little girl, to make herself immaterial and invisible.

On one occasion, however, she was disastrously unsuccessful. "Come here a minute, Marcy," Mrs. Peake commanded her when they had returned to the living room after dinner. "Your hair ribbon's all whank-sided. Come over here and I'll show you how to tie it."

Marcy's heart sank with a thud. Now Grandmother Peake would see—

But Grandmother Peake had already seen, and not only seen but felt. "In the name of peace, Marcy!" she exclaimed. "What under the sun is the matter with your hair, child?"

Her startled tone caught the attention of Godfrey, who had picked up a section of the Sunday paper. He glanced across at the matted lump of hair between his mother's fingers. "Hah!" he barked derisively, and retired behind the paper.

"How on earth you ever got it into such a fix—" Mrs. Peake rose with decision. "You wait here until I get a brush and a comb."

Marcy stood wretchedly and waited, gulping down her humiliation. Godfrey did not look at her. The paper hid his face from view.

Mrs. Peake, returning, set to work on the lump with more vigor than consideration. Marcy winced from time to time, but she made no outcry; if Grandmother Peake chose to pull every hair in her head out by the roots, she would not, though it killed her, utter a single sound of protest before Godfrey.

Grandmother Peake, however, stopped short of scalping her. "It's no use," she said at last. "It'll have to be cut out, that's all. I'll get the shears."

"I wouldn't do that," Godfrey said sharply from behind his paper.

Mrs. Peake paused at the door. "But, Godfrey—"

"It's none of our business, Mamma. Let Mrs. Crittenden attend to it." Godfrey turned over a page.

"I doubt if she even knows it's there," Mrs. Peake remonstrated.

"If she doesn't, she doesn't. It's none of our business," Godfrey repeated. "I'd keep my hands off. Things can't last much longer, anyway, the way they are."

Godfrey's word was law, and that was the end of the matter as

far as Mrs. Peake was concerned. Marcy went home with the matted lump still bulging at the back of her neck. She cut it away that evening, however, herself; and the rest of her hair she was able to comb free from tangles.

She ate her supper that night with deep foreboding, remembering what Godfrey had said—that “things” couldn’t last much longer this way. She ate alone. “Aren’t you coming to the table, Grandma?” she asked as Mrs. Crittenden, having served her and carried Cynthia’s tray upstairs, began stirring the bran mixture she sometimes fed her chickens.

“Grandma’s not hungry, honey-pie.” Mrs. Crittenden hesitated. “Grandma had a big dinner.”

This explanation satisfied Marcy for the moment, but she had not finished her supper when she halted with her fork halfway to her mouth. Grandma had had a big dinner while she was away at Grandmother Peake’s? But Grandma never cooked anything much for herself when Marcy was not there.

Making sure that Mrs. Crittenden had gone out to feed the chickens, Marcy went into the kitchen and investigated. It was all too plain that Grandma had had her reasons for not being hungry. There was nothing on the shelves beyond a few depleted stocks of such things as salt, sugar, flour, and spices. There were no potatoes in the basket and no eggs in the bowl.

This last observation surprised even Marcy, unaccustomed as she was to pay any attention to the affairs of the household. Surely, as long as there were chickens, there ought to be plenty of eggs, whether there was anything else or not. What was Grandma doing with the eggs? And why had she not cooked a chicken, if she couldn’t get anything else?

“Is Uncle Jay in St. Louis again, Grandma?” she asked later in the evening, when Mrs. Crittenden had settled to her Bible reading under the smoky lamp.

“I don’t know, honey-pie. He may be in St. Louis, or he may be in Jefferson City. Lora didn’t say.” Mrs. Crittenden paused, a

shadow of some strong emotion crossing her face. "You'd better get ready for bed now. It's getting late."

But Marcy was still restless. "Don't the chickens lay any more eggs, Grandma? There aren't any in the bowl."

Mrs. Crittenden started violently; she looked at Marcy with absolute terror. Then she forced a little laugh. "Why, yes, honey-pie. Grandma's pullets are laying right along. You didn't want an egg for your supper, did you?" She hesitated, and the wondering child saw that her delicate old face was deeply flushed. "I—I let Mrs. Wilson have a few today. She didn't have anybody to send to the store. Now you go on and get ready for bed, honey. It's after nine o'clock."

This time Marcy was more than ready to comply, for she felt the need of solitude to digest this astounding, this incredible news. Grandma had sold the eggs! She had taken money for them from a neighbor. Everybody in town would know about it.

The thought of what Cynthia would have said to this flagrant breach of the family honor made Marcy shiver even under her heavy blankets. Why, Aunty had even refused to let her, Marcy, sell Christmas seals last year in the Red Cross drive at school. "You can take out the stamps, the same as the others do," she had conceded, "and I'll pay for them. But you're not going to run around town peddling them. You may as well understand once for all that we don't do things like that. You ought to have known it without being told."

"Do I have to tell the other girls I can't help sell them?" Marcy had pleaded, her chin beginning to quiver.

"I don't care what you tell the other girls. But you are to tell your teacher plainly that the Crittenden family doesn't go around taking orders for anything, whether it's stamps or shoestrings. We've got along so far without asking favors of anybody outside the family, and if we can't get along the rest of our lives on the same principle, the sooner we're dead the better." She had paused to get Marcy a handkerchief and tell her to blow her nose. "And

don't cry about it. I want you to get over this notion, Marcy, that you have to do everything the other girls do. If you're ever going to amount to anything you'll have to be satisfied to be different. That's one thing sure."

Remembering this episode, which was permanently vivid in her mind because she had been so bitterly disappointed—there was little novelty or romance in carrying the Christmas seals home to Auntie and carrying the money straight back to school!—Marcy felt as guilty of Grandma's malfeasance with the eggs as Grandma herself should properly have felt, and she had a sense of injustice as well. She was undoubtedly accessory after the fact; her own supper must have been paid for with the tainted money. Christine Wilson's mother's money. . . .

Marcy turned over in bed. The air in the room, outside the sheltering blankets, was growing very cold. She pulled the covers close up under her chin and curled herself into a ball.

Why was Uncle Jay always out of town? He hardly ever came home nowadays, and the grocery orders, when he sent them, were just what Grandma had asked for and nothing more. "Things pretty tight right now," she had heard him say more and more frequently. Once he had said it in Aunt Lora's presence, and Aunt Lora, sniffing, had retorted: "It might loosen them up a little if you stopped drinking up every dollar you make. You don't give me enough to keep my own table decent, let alone—"

She had stopped then before the warning in Jay's eyes; but Marcy, hearing, had drawn her own conclusions. Something of Cynthia's remembered bitterness at accepting help from Jay had struck then into her mind and was lodged there still. If she could only earn some money herself!

Marcy cogitated. How did girls in books earn money?

They sold flowers. But there were no flowers in the winter, and the Crittendens couldn't sell things, anyway.

They went and got work as "companions" to crotchety old ladies who kept parrots and shouted, pounding on the floor with

gold-headed canes. Marcy knew no old ladies of this description, and from humiliating experience with her own pacifistic tendencies she thought it only too probable that at the first pound or the first shout she would be off like a snipe, anyway. "Crybaby! Scaredy-cat!" the old lady's parrot would hoot after her.

A gust of wind shook the unsteady old house. The child huddled closer under her blankets and went drearily to sleep.

—27—

THUS CLOSED down upon Marcy the wild dark days of her childhood's darkest winter. After the snow fell the house was seldom warm enough to be really comfortable, for Mrs. Crittenden's economies of course included the saving of fuel. Marcy, an ease-loving little girl, found herself incompletely consoled by the fierce beauty of the outside world, with its long stretches of thin blue-shadowed snow and its jagged black tree shapes cut into a dense gray sky.

Winter at best had never appealed much to her, but at least it had meant indoor warmth and comfort, Aunt's stories and poems to listen to, shared laughter at Reine coming in covered with snow to shake herself prodigiously on the hearth rug. It had meant Christmas, too, that time of magic and dream; and this year, as far as Marcy could see, even Christmas was likely to be shorn of its natural glory. It was Aunt who had made Christmas for Marcy. On Christmas Eve, if at no other time in the long year, Aunt had wound her long braid about her head, put on street clothing, and gone forth in the evening to that mysterious meeting with the season's saint that meant, to Marcy, a night of heavenly dreams and a waking to more than heavenly splendor.

And now, without Aunt? Marcy no longer actually believed in Santa Claus, of course, but she cherished the dear illusion. She considered the possibilities and found them scant indeed. Uncle

Jay had absented himself more and more often of late and had stayed away longer and longer. Again and again Marcy had eaten a solitary supper in the flickering yellow lamplight of the cluttered kitchen while Grandma, not hungry, read her Bible on the other side of the table to save oil. Marcy had tried on several such occasions to divide her own supper with Grandma, but Mrs. Crittenden was steadfast in refusing; she had had no appetite all day, perhaps she needed a tonic; or she had been hungry before supper and had picked up a bite as she worked.

And the holiday season was fast drawing on. Marcy watched the calendar; her first words every afternoon, as she burst in from school and took off her coat and cap, were a question: "Has Uncle Jay come back yet, Grandma?"

Mrs. Crittenden would shake her head. "Not yet, honey-pie." On the twentieth of December her glance, as she answered the child, involuntarily strayed toward the kitchen, and Marcy, halted in putting away her wraps, realized with a stagger of her pulses that Grandma was afraid there might not even be any Christmas dinner.

Marcy drew in her breath sharply. She would have to do something about Christmas herself.

She could get a tree. There were plenty of little cedars in the woodlot at the edge of town. She could take the hatchet and cut one down and drag it home herself. But how to trim it once she had it? Reine had galloped over the box of Christmas-tree ornaments last year when they took the tree down and had broken them all to pieces. "Have we got any popcorn, Grandma?" she inquired that evening after supper. "Or cranberries?"

"No, honey-pie, not a one." Mrs. Crittenden sighed. "Grandma wants to get a few cranberries, though, as soon as Uncle Jay comes home."

Marcy was silent for a moment. "We couldn't buy any Christmas-tree decorations, could we, Grandma?" she asked, although she knew the question was absurd.

Mrs. Crittenden sighed again. "I reckon not, honey. Maybe Uncle Jay'll bring some when he comes."

Marcy felt this to be extremely doubtful. Uncle Jay might not come until it was too late, anyway. The Christmas tree, if they were to have one, must be her own responsibility. She rummaged every room in the house except Cynthia's, looking for possible trimmings; a torn scrap of tinfoil lurking at the back of one of the sideboard drawers was seized upon and hoarded like gold.

She might make paper chains if she had some colored paper. She pondered this possibility for a time and then, with a sudden inspiration, dragged forth a pile of old magazines. She would cut the strips from the colored pages, wherever there was a spot of color large enough. There were not many such spots, and the wrong colors and the printing showed on the other side when she looped the strips together; but Marcy did her best to ignore these imperfections. "They're pretty," she assured herself hopefully. She made several lengths of them, taking infinite pains to select the gayest colors.

The chains finished, she had another inspiration; Grandma had lots of old seed catalogues! She could cut out the big bright-colored single blossoms and paste a little girl's head from the color pages of the clothing catalogue in the center of each. That would make separate pendants to take the place of bubbles and bells.

The piece of tinfoil she saved for the top of the tree. "Do you know how to cut out a star, Grandma?" she asked.

Mrs. Crittenden did not, but thought she could manage a butterfly. Marcy gravely considered this anarchistic suggestion; she had never seen a Christmas tree with a butterfly on top. "I reckon that'll be all right," she said at last.

The butterfly was a success, and Marcy felt a growing satisfaction as she looked at her little heap of finished decorations. She took the hatchet down from the kitchen shelf and went out to get the tree. The day was mild, and the snow was nearly all gone;

there would be none left for Christmas. A straggling wild rose bush along the way, to which there still clung a handful of brilliant flame-colored hips, caught her eye, and her heart leaped with pleasure. She could string those, and they would be just as good as cranberries for the tree! But there were not many of them, and she could find no others anywhere.

On Christmas Eve Jay Crittenden was still out of town. Marcy went upstairs with a sinking heart. No snow, no Santa Claus, no oranges, no grapes and bananas and nuts and exciting bunches of raisins on the stem! No delicious din to bring Reine barking jealously at the door to be let in where the fun was, to go frisking about among the discarded tissue-paper wrappings in a brief and laughable renewal of her long-forgotten puppyhood. No Aunty. . . .

Aunty was restless tonight. Marcy could hear her pacing. Would she never leave her room again, never as long as she lived? Did she perhaps steal out of the house at night after Marcy was asleep, and walk down to the great dark pine tree, her brown robe blowing about her in the wind and the cold?

Marcy swallowed hard against the tightness in her chest and stood for a long time looking out the window. It was a dark, dark night, cloudy and forbidding. There was not a sound to be heard. Aunty had even stopped walking the floor. Marcy thought of the rhyme Aunty had read to her every Christmas Eve of her life until tonight:

*'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse. . . .*

Not even a mouse indeed. Not even Santa Claus, Marcy thought bitterly.

She crept into bed, the incorrigible hopefulness of childhood once more asserting itself. Maybe Uncle Jay was getting off the train right now. Maybe he would come over in the night, and in the morning it would be Christmas after all.

A heart-stopping thought came to her. Auntie had stopped pacing the floor. Maybe Auntie was going to—maybe after all, after all, Auntie was going to—

With a sob of anticipatory joy she sprang out of bed, found a clean stocking, and hung it on the bedpost. Mrs. Crittenden, coming in half an hour later to see that the child was covered, caught sight of it dangling there and drew in her breath with dismay; was there anything in the house, anything at all, that she might put into it?

She knew there was not. "Jay! Jay!" she muttered to herself. "O Lord, dear Lord, dear blessed Lord, please send him home to us!"

Marcy stirred; she had not been quite asleep. "Merry Christmas, Grandma," she murmured.

She woke at dawn, as she always did on Christmas, and after one half-reluctant glance at the limp stocking shut her eyes again. Uncle Jay had not come; Auntie had not—Auntie had not—

Marcy's eyes stung. Hurriedly she summoned forth the gallant images of girls in books, who were always brave no matter what happened to them; she would be brave, too, she would show she was a Crittenden, she would not cry! She had her tree, anyway. She and Grandma had set it up, with much travail and several severe abrasions of the fingers, in a corner of the library, and Marcy had decked its branches with her homemade trimmings.

She slipped out of bed and went to look at it again. To her astonishment Mrs. Crittenden was already up and dressed, sitting beside the window with her frail hands folded in her lap. Reine was coming down the back stairs after her night's watching; her nails clicked faintly against the floor. "What did you get up so early for, Grandma?" Marcy asked, gulping.

"Good morning, honey-pie." Mrs. Crittenden smiled wanly. "Grandma didn't go to bed at all. Grandma wasn't sleepy. Put on your shoes and stockings, honey. That old floor's too cold for your little bare feet."

Marcy, turning to obey, looked toward the cedar sapling in its

cobbled finery. "Anyhow, we've got a good Christmas tree," she said, trying to laugh. "It's—it's pretty," she added uncertainly, "isn't it, Grandma?"

Had Mrs. Crittenden only agreed all might have been well. But she was weak from vigil and fasting and already overpowered with heartbreaking memories. The appeal was too much for her. "You poor child, you!" she cried, her voice breaking.

Marcy's chin trembled. "Aunty," she said in a sudden strangled outcry. "I want Aunty, Grandma! I want my Aunty!" She burst into passionate tears, the first she had shed since the day of Cynthia's withdrawal. "Aunty! Aunty! Aunty!" she sobbed.

In vain Mrs. Crittenden gathered her up in her arms, sat down with her in the rocking chair as though she had been a baby. In vain she murmured endearments, in vain she consoled and explained; none of it comforted Marcy, whose tears were not for Cynthia Crittenden but for herself and that unutterably precious part of herself once known to her as Aunty. Aunty, in whom the sun of life rose and set, who made truth true and falsehood false, without whom even Christmas was Christmas no longer. "Aunty! Aunty!" she sobbed desolately, her face hidden against Mrs. Crittenden's shoulder.

"Hush, Marcy, hush, honey," her grandmother besought her, rocking and patting. "Hush now, honey-pie. You make Grandma feel so bad."

Marcy could not hush. All the tears she had repressed since the day of incredible exile broke from her now in a torrent that could not be stemmed. She cried on and on, paying no attention to anything Mrs. Crittenden said. At last the cajoling old voice could be heard no longer, and the little girl's twitching body felt her grandmother's arms relax. She sat erect on the soft old knees, struck suddenly with terror. "Grandma!" she screamed through a fresh paroxysm of sobs. "Grandma! What's the matter, Grandma?"

But there was no answer. Mrs. Crittenden had fainted.

"THIS TIME you'll have to do something about it, and do it quick." Lora Crittenden's darning needle stabbed the sock in her hand with angry emphasis. "And don't suggest again that we move over there to that Godforsaken old barn and live with them. I've told you and I've told your mother I won't do it. I'm not exactly anxious for any more work and worry here than I've already got, either, but I don't suppose you want to wake up some fine morning and have the whole town know you left your own mother to starve."

Jay Crittenden, slumped in a worn Morris chair, let his hands fall on its arms in a defeated gesture. "Christ," he muttered wretchedly. "Christ A'mighty. Poor Ma."

"Poor Ma sure enough," Lora sniffed. "With a son like you."

Crittenden's heavy eyelids lifted and drooped again. "Ma all right now, Marcy?" he inquired of the child, who still stood holding the note Mrs. Crittenden had instructed her to give Jay the moment he arrived.

Marcy nodded. "Aunt Lora came."

Lora sniffed again. "Marcy came running in here yesterday morning before I was up, without even a coat on, to tell me something was the matter with your mother. She said Cynthia wouldn't answer when she called her. So I went back with her. I told you what I found. Now you'd better——"

Crittenden rose heavily. "All right. All right. Nothin' gained naggin' at me. Feel a damn sight worse'n you do 'bout it." He took the note from Marcy and read it. "Tell Ma be out just soon's

I c'n make it," he directed her. "Got see Trumbull first." He glanced back at Lora as he put on his hat. "Stop talk t' Mrs. Peake on m' way," he added.

"You'd better," Lora agreed, unmollified. "You want me to get the east room ready?"

Crittenden's shoulders sagged. "Reckon might's well." He hunched himself together and departed.

Marcy, in panic terror, set out for home. The day was close and sultry for the time of year, and she felt as though every breath were a separate effort. The Crittenden family was breaking up! Uncle Jay had told Aunt Lora to get the east room ready for Grandma; Grandma would come over here to live, and she, Marcy, would have to go and live at the Peakes'. But Aunty! What would become of Aunty? What would Uncle Jay do to Aunty? Fright squeezed at Marcy's heart; she and Grandma couldn't go away and leave Aunty, they couldn't, they couldn't! And Grandma didn't want to go and live with Aunt Lora any more than Marcy wanted to go and live with Grandmother Peake. It would kill Grandma, she had once told Marcy, not to have some kind of place of her own. Now she would have none. She would be Aunt Lora's pensioner; Uncle Jay was hardly ever at home.

Suppose it really did kill Grandma! She had better not tell Grandma what Uncle Jay and Aunt Lora had said.

She plodded heavily up the walk at home and entered. Mrs. Crittenden sat by the library window, wrapped in a black woolen shawl. "Did your Uncle Jay get home, honey?" she asked nervously.

Marcy nodded. "He said he'd be right out as soon as he could. He has to talk to Dr. Trumbull and—and somebody else, first."

Mrs. Crittenden closed her eyes in brief thanksgiving. "Was he—all right, Marcy?"

Marcy hesitated. "I reckon so." She paused. "He felt bad because he didn't get home on time."

Mrs. Crittenden smiled deprecatingly. "Why, that was all right," she said. "Your Uncle Jay's a mighty smart man. He gets off up there in St. Louis or Jefferson City, talking with all those other smart men in the government, and he just loses all track of time. Nobody could hold that against him."

Marcy made no comment. She knew what kept her Uncle Jay in St. Louis or Jefferson City, and she knew Grandma knew she knew it, but she took quite as a matter of course the need they both felt to maintain an outward attitude of decent unawareness. Lora's blatant proclamations of the discreditable fact were as rasping to Marcy's sensibilities as to those of her grandmother.

Jay did not arrive until after four o'clock. "He hasn't got the groceries," Mrs. Crittenden worried as she caught sight of him. "He must have had them sent. Let him in, Marcy."

Once inside, Crittenden found it difficult to meet his mother's trusting gaze. "You all right now, Ma?" he asked in a muffled voice as he took off his overcoat. There was tenderness in his tone, and his dark, heavy-lidded eyes were strained against strong emotion. "You sure?"

"Why, yes, Jay; I'm fine, honey." Mrs. Crittenden smiled reassuringly. "Sit down and rest yourself. Marcy, you take Uncle Jay's hat and hang it up for him."

But Jay kept his hat in his hands, turning it over and over like an abashed schoolboy as he sat there gathering strength to tell his mother what he had come to tell her. His tension was at once communicated to Mrs. Crittenden; almost visibly she mustered her feeble resources to meet him. Marcy sat in a small rocker a little way apart, pretending to read but actually listening with an intensity of dread that brought out gooseflesh along her arms. Why wouldn't Uncle Jay tell Grandma and get it over with?

"Can't have such things happenin' any more, Ma," Jay began at last. "Bad business, you and Marcy tryin' to manage alone. Told you that when Cynthia first started kickin' up her heels, didn't I?"

Mrs. Crittenden managed a faint laugh. "Yes, I know you did,

Jay. But we've got along just fine, Marcy and me. We'll be all right now you've got home. Who-all did you see in the city?" Her fingers picked at the fluted edge of her shawl.

Jay would not be sidetracked. "Jus' won't do, Ma. Got look facts 'n face. S'pose I hadn't got home today?"

Mrs. Crittenden cleared her throat. "Lora——"

"S'pose Lora ain't home? She ain't always there, either. What'd you 'a' done, she'd been gone yesterday mornin'?" He passed an unsteady hand over his forehead. "Ma," he began desperately, "I hate this bad's you do. Always wanted take care you 'n' Marcy way you wanted it, but——" He paused and swallowed. "Ain't much good to you, I reckon, Ma," he admitted thickly.

"Yes, you are, Jay; yes, you are. You're a good boy. Don't you feel bad, honey." Jeanie Crittenden leaned forward and patted one of his heavy, twitching hands. "You've always been a good boy."

Jay choked again; what he had come to say broke from him in a strangled, muttering growl. "Talked Trumbull 's morning. Says he c'n get Cynthia in at the Institute."

Mrs. Crittenden paled. "The—the Institute, Jay?" she quavered.

"Yes, the Institute, damn it!" Crittenden bellowed. "You know what I mean. You heard Trumbull talk 'bout it often 'nough. Best place for her, way things are now. Trumbull says she ain't following his orders. Ain't gettin' anywhere that way, is she? Institute might cure her."

"Jay, she wouldn't ever go to the Institute! She'd kill herself first! She wouldn't let you take her there, she——"

"Ain't goin' to ask her," Crittenden growled.

There was a silence, horror hanging almost visible in the air. "Jay—the baby——" Mrs. Crittenden whispered at last.

"Mrs. Peake'll take Marcy." Jay, having told the worst, was somewhat relieved. "Talked Mrs. Peake little while 'go. Said course she would. Be glad to."

Even in her distress Mrs. Crittenden bridled a little. "I

wouldn't give her a dog I liked, to take care of," she said with pitiful dignity. "I saw her strike Agnes once after she was sixteen years old—Agnes, the best girl that ever lived! Agnes never said a short word to me in her life. She was just as good and sweet to me as my own daughter could have been." Her soft voice faltered as her disloyal heart reminded her how far better to her, indeed, than her own daughter had Mrs. Peake's Agnes always been. "You can't tell me that if she'd mortify Agnes that way——"

"Well, what made Agnes such a good girl? Mrs. Peake was her mother. Must been some good in her somewhere. Always liked her myself."

Mrs. Crittenden, trapped, looked about her in frantic appeal for the help that was nowhere to be found. "I'm—I'm afraid I'd be such a bother to Lora, Jay," she faltered.

Crittenden fidgeted uncomfortably. "Know you don't like Lora much, but——"

His mother lifted a protesting hand. "No, no, Jay, it's not that. I like Lora. I like Lora very well." Her hunted eyes still roved the shabby room. "But Lora's busy; she won't want to bother with an old woman in the house. I don't blame her. Every woman likes to have her own home to herself."

"Lora means all right." Crittenden got up to go. "Just nothin' else for it, Ma." He put on his coat. "Told Mrs. Peake Marcy'd be over tomorrow. Told Pickett send surrey two-thirty t'morrow for you. Trumbull 'n me'll take care Cynthia t'night. Get 'tover with."

He put on his hat and left. The appalled silence in the room was like a living, waiting presence. Neither Marcy nor her grandmother noticed that the house had darkened strangely and that the sky outside was yellow with mounting storm. Marcy, touching her dry lips with her tongue in order to be able to speak, whispered, "Grandma!" But Mrs. Crittenden did not hear her. Reine, who had been lying asleep by the fire, had got to her aged feet with a little shuddering yelp of incredulous joy. The heavy

portiere was suddenly swept aside, and Cynthia Crittenden in the brown monk's robe, her face as white as white cotton, stood on the library threshold.

— 29 —

SHE WAS smiling. "A very pretty little scheme," she said, patting the frantic dog. "Hello, Reine. Poor old girl, have you been lonesome? A very, very pretty little scheme. Jay always was ingenious, and now he turns out to be his father's own son as well. Pa would be proud of him, wouldn't he, Ma? How do you think you're going to like living with Lora?" The smile went from her face. "You were just going to sit there, were you, and let them ship me off to the Institute by force?"

Mrs. Crittenden was on her feet, her hands twisting each other in agony. "Daught, my honey, my baby child," she cried, her fragile voice catching and breaking, "honey, don't break your ma's heart! What can I do, Daught? What can I do against Jay? I've not got bite nor sup nor shelter without him. I'm old and helpless; what he says for me to do I must do, don't you see I must? Jay wouldn't send you to a bad place, honey; he's always tried to be a good brother to you. He'll see that you're well taken care of——"

Cynthia's lip curled. "So he said. He and Dr. Trumbull will take care of Cynthia tonight. Well, let them catch me first." She bent to the whimpering dog. "Yes, Reine, yes, of course I've come back; I've come after you. Well, well, did I treat her like a dog, the poor old half-witted faithful girl? Yes, yes. You just wait till I get my wraps on and you and I will go for a little walk."

"Daught." Mrs. Crittenden's lips were dry. "Where are you going? What do you mean?"

Cynthia looked at her levelly. "Does it matter? I assure you, Ma, that wherever I'm going and whatever I mean I'll be better

off than I would be in the place where you were going to let them send me. There's just one thing you need to know about it; I'll be off your hands for good, for I'm not coming back."

Marcy, who all this time had been sitting like one frozen to her chair, sprang to her feet at this with a desperate cry. "Aunty! Aunty! Take me with you, Aunty! Don't go away and leave me! Take me with you! Take me with you!" She flung herself against Cynthia in a paroxysm of grief mingled with rending ecstasy at the touch of the loved form. "Please, please, Aunty, please take me with you!"

Cynthia looked down at her but did not touch her. "Oh, no; you're going to live at your Grandmother Peake's and learn how to make bread."

Marcy's clinging arms fell to her sides; the eyes in her still-uplifted face were not the eyes of a child. Cynthia's own face was contorted for a moment, but she drew away. "No, Marcy, you wouldn't want to go where I'm going, or to see me do what I'm going to do. Leave that to Jay and Dr. Trumbull." She started. "Was that *thunder*? In December?"

It was thunder; Reine uttered an uneasy, yelping whine. Cynthia's white face grew whiter, but she laughed. "A storm. A freak storm. Thunder in December. Wouldn't you know it? I'll take back everything I've ever said against your God, Ma; as an impresario, He's without an equal. That's right, Reine"—as the old dog, after an agony of twitching indecision, suddenly shot past her and fled up the stairs—"run! Go hide under the bed where the thunder can't get you—never mind about me! This really wasn't necessary, you know, Ma; I know when I'm beaten. But I suppose He has to set His scene. I see now why you're so fond of Him; He's just a noisier edition of Pa. Oh, stop it—stop it!" she suddenly shrieked as a blue glare of lightning filled the room and an avalanche of thunder mingled with the heavy, menacing wind to shake the old house from cellar to rooftop. "Oh, God, I can't stand another storm now, haven't I been tortured enough? Marcy, get

away from that window, that lightning's too close. Get over there in the middle of the room."

Marcy, whose body and brain alike were without sensation, numbly obeyed. The room was suddenly as dark as midnight, and with a gasping imprecation Cynthia fumbled on the table for a match and lighted the lamp, its yellow flare making a death mask of her pallid face. Her hands trembled so that she could scarcely replace the globe. "God Almighty," she moaned, "isn't it ever going to rain or hail or whatever it's fixing to do, and get it over with?" She pushed her almost fleshless fingers deep into her hair, her eyes insane with fear. "Ma, did you let Reine in? Where's Reine? Oh, yes, she went upstairs. Ah-h-h-h——"

The wind howled wildly down the fireplace chimney. Mrs. Crittenden took a hesitating step forward. "Daught, hadn't you better——"

Cynthia did not hear her; she was shaking as though with a hard chill. "It's coming closer, Ma," she cried through chattering teeth. "It's coming closer. It's going to hit us. There!" as a ragged ribbon of lightning descended and the punctual thunder rollicked away over the top of the house. "That struck us. See if it didn't."

She disappeared, and they heard her run up the first flight and a little way up the attic stairs; then she ran back down to the second landing, calling, "It's torn the roof wide open. The house is on fire in a dozen places. It'll burn like so much celluloid. Marcy, come up here and help me get Reine out from under this bed; fire or no fire, she'll never budge as long as it's storming. Ma, go call the neighbors. Hurry up! It's already got a start in the attic. It'll be in here in a minute."

She gave her directions in a voice that was almost calm. The immediate threat of the fire and of old Reine's danger had conquered, at least to some extent, her fear of the roaring elements. She knelt beside the bed and seized Reine by the collar. "As soon as I get her out from under the bed, Marcy, you get behind her

and push. Reine! Come out of there, you old fool! Do you want to be roasted to a crackling? Push, Marcy, push!"

Reine, shuddering and whining, was dragged into the open, and they began their difficult descent of the long, winding stair. The heavy old dog gurgled in agony; with the strength of panic terror she resisted them all the way down. Panting, struggling, losing their grip on her unwieldy body and regaining it, they got her somehow to the lower floor and out on the veranda. "Look out for that hole," Cynthia said. "Help me get her out there by the paradise tree. That'll be far enough, and I'll tie her up. Now. Run in the kitchen, the back way, and get me the big butcher knife. I'll have to cut your swing down. And put on your coat, Marcy; you'll freeze. Hurry, honey."

Marcy turned and ran back toward the house, tears of pure joy streaming down her face. What cared she for the fire or anything else, since Auntie had called her "honey" once again?

She flung open the kitchen door, hearing behind her the mixed shouts and the pelting, clattering footsteps of people running toward the fire. "It's the old Crittenden place!" "It's Crittenden's! Hurry up!" "My God, it's the Major's!" "Don't just stand there! Form a line so we can pass the buckets!" "Hell, you can't do nothin' with buckets against a fire like that!" "It's the Crittenden house. Are the folks all out?" "Hurry up."

Marcy, groping her way to the kitchen table, snatched the knife from its drawer and ran back out into the garden, forgetting her coat. She could hear the fire already crackling in the upstairs rooms. They would never save the house. Houses always burned down to the ground, because the village had no fire department and the bucket line couldn't work fast enough. And in a wind like this! Her dress clung to her body as though it were glued there. Her hair whipped wildly into her eyes and out again. Over at the Coltons' men were carrying soaked blankets and quilts up to the roof of the house, to protect it from flying sparks. Marcy could see Inez, wrapped in her mother's plaid shawl, her tow-

colored pigtailed tied with string, dancing up and down near the foot of one of the ladders, shrieking "Don't let it get our house!" But she had no time to notice Inez now.

"Here it is, Auntie," she said, breathless. "Shall I hold Reine?"

"You couldn't hold her; you're not strong enough. You'd better cut the rope. Be careful, now. Cut it as high as you can reach and slide the seat board off." She caught the severed end of the rope and knotted it firmly in Reine's shabby collar. "There! Now behave yourself, Reine. Ma! Where's Ma? Marcy, have you seen Ma?"

"Over there." Marcy pointed to a huddled group of women staring at the angry flames. Mrs. Crittenden had heard her daughter's call. She turned and made a gesture of helpless despair. "My dishes, Daught," she quavered, "all my dishes——"

Marcy, suddenly appalled, plucked at Cynthia's sleeve. "Auntie! Auntie, the books! All the books will burn up!"

Her aunt looked down at her. "We can't get them out, Marcy. The books are gone." Her eyes on the little girl were tender; as though on an impulse past control she suddenly knelt beside Marcy and took her in her arms. "Just remember what we read in them together, honey. Keep it here"—she touched Marcy's forehead with her cold lips—"and here." She caught the child close to her breast. "There'll be other books for you by and by. Are you cold? Here, get under part of my robe." She stood up. "There's Jay coming."

Jay Crittenden, breathless and panting, came running across the garden. "You all right, Ma? Cynthia?" he shouted.

Cynthia turned a grim stare upon him. "We're all right. If you call it all right."

Jay pulled out his handkerchief and mopped his gleaming bald head. "Goner, I reckon."

His sister's face was ghastly in the blue flare of the lightning. "Of course it's a goner. Did you ever see a burning house in this town that wasn't?"

The fire was roaring now in the unabated wind. Coveys of flaming sparks flew with the gale. The upstairs timbers were beginning to crumble. The men were falling back, beaten; several of them had opened the Baptist church down the street and were carrying thither what they had been able to save from the downstairs rooms. "Ain't goin' to be any use," one of them said, panting.

"No use on God's green earth," another agreed.

Mrs. Crittenden sobbed aloud. "Jay, my dishes—all my dishes——"

Crittenden put an arm about her. "Too bad, Ma. Can't be helped."

There was a deafening crash of thunder. A heavy body suddenly whizzed past him, throwing him off balance, and a stricken cry from Cynthia broke into the crashing and shouting. "O God, that thunder! She's broken her collar. Reine! Reine! Come back here, Reine, do you hear me? Get out of my way, Jay. Get out of my way, I tell you, before she gets back in the house!" She flung him savagely aside. "Reine! Here, Reine!"

"Aunty!" screamed Marcy. "Aunty! No! No! No! Don't go!"

Jay Crittenden caught his sister by the arm. "You crazy, Cynthia? Stand still and behave yourself. You can't go back in there now! Stand still, I tell you!"

Cynthia struggled in his grasp. "You let me go, Jay Crittenden! My dog's in that house, do you hear me? My dog's in there! Here, Reine! Here, Reine!" She fought furiously with Jay, at the same time calling Reine over and over. "Here, Reine! Here, Reine! Jay Crittenden, if you don't turn me loose this minute I'll——"

She bent suddenly and fastened her teeth in Jay's wrist. He gave a grunt of pain and rage, involuntarily relaxing his hold, and with fatal precision of timing the wind hurled a thorny twig covered with snowy dead leaves into his eyes. Cynthia was gone like the lightning itself. "Aunty! Aunty!" Marcy shrieked on a long, hopeless sob.

Cynthia paid her no heed. "Here, Reinel! Here, Reinel!" she kept calling. She gained the porch before Jay or any of the men in the bucket line could reach her. Mounting the single step, her full dark robe spread winglike on the wind at her heels, she ran halfway across the veranda, caught her foot in the gap in the floor, and fell headlong. Simultaneously the heavy framework surrounding the fanlight over the door shook asunder in the gale and fell, at one blow pinning her to the floor and crushing the life from her body. And then the hail descended.

—30—

OF REINE nothing was left but a heap of blackened bones. Cynthia, having fallen on her face, escaped disfigurement from the shattered glass of the fanlight, although she had sustained many cuts in addition to the fatal crushing of the skull. Lying in state in Uncle Jay's parlor, with the soft white wool material of her shroud drawn smoothly up under her chin and her once nervous hands serenely folded, she looked far happier than Marcy had ever seen her look in life. But she did not look like Aunty.

This perhaps explained the fact that Marcy, after her first terrified shrieks as she saw Cynthia run forward and fall, had not been able to cry for her aunt's death. That marble woman on the bier was never Aunty. Marcy shut her eyes and made herself remember the charred and smoking ruin of her home as she had seen it from the Coltons' upstairs window on the morning after the fire; she rehearsed again and again the horrifying succession of events that had led up to the final tragedy. None of it helped her to realize that the thing had actually taken place and that Aunty was gone from her forever.

One thing she would not let herself remember: the moment when Aunty had taken her in her arms. If she thought of that she would die. She would bleed to death internally and nobody could help her.

A sense of unreality also filled Uncle Jay's house as the funeral preparations were put in train. Mrs. Crittenden, after one long outburst of desolate weeping, had grown quiet and composed, but she seemed not to realize where she was or what was going on. Jay himself appeared stunned. He wandered repeatedly past the parlor door and looked in at his sister's coffin, quickly looking away as though he expected her even now to cry out curses upon him.

His wife, as she was not slow to remark, had her hands full, for neither he nor Mrs. Crittenden could cope with the "practical arrangements." It was Mrs. Jay who conferred with the undertaker and the clergyman and Pickett's livery, who saw visitors and answered inquiries, who received Mrs. Trumbull when she came bringing several complete outfits of Diane's clothing for Marcy.

Lora was kinder to the little girl than she had ever been before, although even now she could not resist an occasional probing of the wound—if wound there were, which, she privately informed her own inquiring friends, she doubted. "Selfish as they come," she announced to one of these in a perfectly audible whisper. "Of course, it was Cynthia's own fault in a way; but wouldn't you think, after the way she slaved for that child—"

She turned from this pseudo-secret conference to smile with patronizing commiseration at her niece. "Your Aunty was always mighty good to you, wasn't she, Marcy?"

"Yes," Marcy admitted miserably. "Ma'am," she added, recalling Mrs. Peake's recent admonition.

"I expect you cried all night last night, didn't you?" Mrs. Jay continued.

Marcy looked at her. No, she had not cried all night, but she had not slept, either. There was no use trying to answer Aunt Lora when she asked such questions. Marcy knew why she asked them. She had never been deceived by Mrs. Jay's occasional pretense of friendly feeling.

Mrs. Peake arrived early in the proceedings, approaching her

granddaughter as soon as she had spoken to Mrs. Crittenden and Jay. "Well, Marcy," she said in a tone of unaccustomed mildness. "How are you?" She laid a firm kind hand on Marcy's shoulder. "It's hard for you, I know. You be a big girl, now."

Marcy's lip trembled, but she stiffened it with an effort. "Yes, Grandmother," she whispered.

"That's right." Mrs. Peake patted the shoulder approvingly. "I always knew you could if you wanted to."

These words kindled a faint warmth in Marcy's cold little heart. For the first time she felt as though it might not be so terrible a thing to live with Grandmother Peake after all. Yet there was Godfrey. . . .

She went to Grandma, who sat alone in Lora Crittenden's bedroom. "Grandma," she began—timidly, for Grandma seemed scarcely to know she was there—"what will we do now"—she gulped—"without Aunty?"

Mrs. Crittenden turned her eyes upon the child, and then glanced with involuntary shrinking toward the door from which came the sound of Lora's voice. "The Lord will provide, honey-pie." Her bosom heaved spasmodically. "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. He knows what He wants us to do." She nodded and patted Marcy's arm. "You just trust the good Lord, honey; He won't let you come to any harm."

Marcy turned away, helpless; He *had* let her come to harm! Probably He would not even notice or care what happened to her now; and, even if He did, there was probably not much that He or anybody else could do about Godfrey Peake.

Cynthia's funeral was not largely attended. She had vanished from the active life of the town so long ago that to most of its population she was only a legend, and a legend to be held in disapprobation. Nearly all those who came were men, friends of the Major's or their sons who remembered him; the women of the town, save for Mrs. Peake and a scattering of loyal friends of Mrs. Crittenden, were conspicuously absent.

Cynthia had been a Crittenden, and while she lived no woman of them all, whatever she might make a practice of saying "behind her back," would have ventured any slightest token of disapproval in her presence; but now that she was dead more than one of her former acquaintances, as well as some who had never really known her, took the opportunity to pay off some real or fancied score against the Crittendens by ignoring her funeral. Mrs. Jolly Hunt was not of these. Marcy, sitting small and dismal beside Grandma in the front pew, saw Mrs. Jolly singing in the choir, the gold fillings in her teeth gleaming every time she took a high note.

*Asleep in Jesus! Blessed sleep,
From which none ever wakes to weep!*

sang the choir in muted quavers. Marcy imagined Auntie's mocking laughter. She looked sidewise at Grandma, but Grandma's head was bent and her face covered by her long black veil; her tiny hands in their black gloves were tightly clasped in prayer. Uncle Jay, beside her, still wore the dazed look that had not left his face since Auntie's fall.

Marcy felt, rather than saw, the scantness of the congregation. Though it made her faintly uncomfortable, her Crittenden training enabled her to think little of its importance; Auntie wouldn't have cared! But she did wish—she could not help wishing—that there had been more flowers. At the foot of the coffin stood Jay's wreath of cream-colored roses and Mrs. Peake's sheaf of white carnations, and on its white velvet top there lay, pale and anemic, the single forced blossom from Mrs. Crittenden's amaryllis plant, which some bemused neighbor had chosen to save from the fire. That was all. Marcy would have liked to pile the coffin high with splendid blossoms, crimson and purple and gold. This penury of pallid blooms was not for Auntie.

The choir had sat down now, and the minister was beginning his sermon. Marcy listened to the familiar words, made almost

meaningless to her by weekly repetition and more than a little repellent by association with Mrs. Jolly Hunt. The sermon, like the decorous flowers, seemed to her irrelevant. None of it had anything to do with Auntie.

Now he was pronouncing the benediction: “. . . unto the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost——” The unctuous words lay heavy on the air.

Marcy was not to go to the cemetery, and Mrs. Peake came to find her as they emerged from the church. “Where are your clothes, Marcy?” she asked as she took the child’s hand. “We’d better get them before we go home.”

Marcy looked up at her, surprised. “They all got burnt up.”

Mrs. Peake nodded. “I know they did. But I think Mrs. Trumbull brought you some of Diane’s—more than those you’ve got on, I mean. I guess they’re at your Uncle Jay’s. We’ll go get them. Say good-by to your grandma first.”

Was there a touch of triumphant satisfaction in Grandmother Peake’s tone? No, surely none could triumph over Grandma now, Grandma wan and pale as a little pale leaf in the wind. Marcy kissed Grandma’s cheek and was held close for a moment at the door of the church, Grandma’s veil fluttering around her. “I’ll come see you sometimes, Grandma,” she promised, but Mrs. Crittenden did not answer.

That night, after a subdued and silent meal with Mrs. Peake and Godfrey, Marcy went upstairs alone, to go to bed in the alien house as she had done on those enforced visits when Auntie or Uncle Jay had sent her there to get her away from home. Would she have to sleep in this room all the time now? It had been her mother’s room, but it seemed to her a cheerless place, bare of all ornament except the ruffles on the curtains and of everything else except the necessary furniture. Marcy repressed a hard, dry sob of loneliness. There was a tight lump in her throat, but she still found it impossible to cry.

She undressed herself wretchedly and crawled into the big

chilly bed, pulling the covers close under her chin. Forlornness enveloped her like a clinging web, and the silence in the room oppressed her with its intensity. It was a relief when Grandmother Peake's voice came clearly up the stairs.

" . . . not a tear was shed, Godfrey. Not a single tear! It was the strangest funeral I ever saw. And the saddest."

"Even the old lady didn't cry, eh?"

"Not a tear." Mrs. Peake had begun to rock; the long-drawn squeal of the rocker accompanied her voice. "She looked worn out—I thought there for a minute she might be going to faint—but she didn't cry. I just thought to myself, Godfrey, now that the first shock's over she's probably relieved."

"I don't know why she wouldn't be," Godfrey conceded. "Brat didn't cry either?"

Mrs. Peake stopped rocking. "No, she didn't, Godfrey. I wished she would. She looked—I never saw a child look the way she did. It wasn't natural. And it was funny, but she looked just like Cynthia there for a minute; I never saw any resemblance before, and it fairly made my flesh creep. But she didn't cry. It was awful, I tell you."

Godfrey laughed shortly. "Awful because nobody cried, or because Marcy looked like her own aunt? I'm surprised at you, Mamma; you're acting like a woman."

Mrs. Peake's chuckle lacked conviction. "Well, but it is awful, Godfrey, to think of a human life ending and nobody regretting it enough to shed a tear. I'm not particularly sentimental, as you know; but how would I feel if I thought nobody'd grieve for me at all?" The rocker creaked again as she settled back in her chair. "I wouldn't like it a bit, I can tell you!" she declared.

Godfrey rose and pushed back his chair. "Well, don't worry," he said on an amiable yawn. "I promise to cry uproariously. I'm going to bed. You ready to have the front hall light turned off?"

The house grew quiet for the night. Marcy turned her pillow over and closed her eyes. The hall clock at the foot of the stairs struck half-past ten.

“MY MAMMA says God made the lightnin’ strike your house on purpose,” said Inez Colton.

Inez, overcome with curiosity about Marcy’s new abode and her reaction to it, had called early on the morning after her friend’s removal to the Peake household. She was sublimely oblivious of the somewhat bleak stare with which Marcy’s new guardian had received her. Mrs. Peake was not enthusiastic about Inez. “There comes that flip little flibberty-gibbet Inez Colton,” she had muttered to herself as Inez approached. But before she left the children alone she seized the moment when Marcy was listlessly hanging up Inez’ wraps to whisper to the visitor: “See if you can’t get her to go play outdoors a little while.”

Marcy had overheard this direction, but she had no intention of playing outdoors. Having finished putting away her guest’s coat and cap, she started immediately back upstairs to her bedroom. Inez protestingly followed. “What’s the matter, Marcy? What’s the matter with you, anyhow?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” Marcy said. She sat down on the edge of the bed and looked out of the window.

Inez bristled. Never patient, she now progressed through matter-of-factness to impatience to indignation without even deeming it necessary to signalize these stages in her usual style of repartee. Finding Marcy quite unresponsive to the awful look she bent upon her, she resorted to spite. “Mamma says your house burnt down because your Aunty was a bad wicked crazy lady and your Uncle Jay gets drunk all the time. She says your fam’ly’s all

goin' to pieces and has been for years and you all think you're so much. She says what could you expect? She says——"

Marcy's heavy lids lifted; her gray eyes darkened. "You hush up, Inez Colton. My Auntie was not bad and wicked and crazy, either. You'd better not say that again."

"Will if I want to," retorted Inez. "Your Auntie was a bad wicked old crazy old bad wicked old——"

"You hush up," Marcy said, getting to her feet. "You hush up. You hush up right now and you get out of here and go home and don't you ever come over here again as long as you live." She took a step toward Inez, her fingers twitching.

Inez, taken aback at this unexpected resistance, hauled in her sails a bit. "Well, you don't haf to get so mad about it, do you? All I said was——"

"You hush up! Don't you say that again!"

"Well, all right." Inez changed her tactics. "What do you want to play? Why'n't we go outdoors 'n' see what this yard looks like? I never been here before."

Marcy sat down again apathetically, dropping her hands at her sides. "I don't want to."

Inez was startled; never before in her experience had Marcy refused to follow her lead, or even so much as betrayed reluctance. "Well, what *do* you want to do, then?" she countered with a modicum of respect.

"Nothing." Marcy turned to the window.

Inez stared at her. "I'll go home," she threatened.

Marcy turned and looked directly at her. "All right. Go home. I don't care."

Inez was incredulous. Her forehead reddened with rage, and she gave an inarticulate splutter; then, apparently, she took second thought. "I reckon you feel bad, Marcy," she said in a tone of pious condolence, "because your Auntie won't get to go to heaven, don't you?"

Marcy's face turned white. "You hush up about my Auntie!"

"Well, my goodness, can't I even mention her name even?" Inez kept her tone reasonable with an effort. "All I said was—" "You hush up!"

"Well," Inez began. "Well, all right." There was silence for a moment or two, Inez obviously searching her mind for the right approach to this new and intractable Marcy. "Well, I reckon I'll haf to play by myself, then," she said at last, in the indulgent tone of a mother humoring a cross-grained child. "This is my house. I'm givin' my little girl a bath all over." She maneuvered an imaginary little girl into the pin tray on Marcy's dresser and admonished her severely. "You better hold still while I wrench out your ears," she ordered this unlucky infant, "or I'll spank you good and you haven't got any cloes on, either." She looked toward Marcy for approval, but Marcy was back at the window, looking out; apparently she had not even heard.

Inez' endurance was wearing thin. "Come on and play, Marcy, why don't you?" she urged. "If you don't," she added after waiting a barely perceptible instant, "I'm goin' home, just as sure as you're born." She paused for emphasis. "Right straight home," she added.

"I don't care," Marcy said again, without turning.

Inez, astounded, stood up. This simply could not be believed. "All right, then. I'm goin' home. I'm goin' home right this minute."

Marcy did not answer.

"I'm goin' home, Marcy," Inez repeated warningly. "Look here at me. Don't you see I'm goin' over to the door?"

There was no reply.

"I'm goin' home," Inez reiterated loudly. "Marcy! Can't you hear anything? I'm goin' home!" She walked in a marked manner to the bedroom door. "I'm goin' out in the hall, Marcy," she called over her shoulder. "In just a minute I'm goin' down the stairs and go home." She paused again, then went a step or two down the stairs. "Marcy! I'm halfway down!"

Still Marcy did not answer. Inez' temper exploded. "All right for you, Marcy Crittenden! Just for that I *will* go home and I'll never come over to your house any more, you wait and see! And God did too make the lightnin' strike your old house and your Auntie was too a bad wicked crazy lady——"

Marcy appeared with burning eyes at the top of the stairs, and Inez prudently ran the rest of the way down. Snatching her wraps from the hall tree, she flung open the front door and looked back for a final gibe. "Yah! Think you're so smart! Your fam'ly's goin' to pieces! Your fam'ly's goin' to pee-ces! Yah, yah, yah!" She thrust out her tongue at the advancing Marcy and banged the door with all her force.

Mrs. Peake, coming through the hall a moment later, found Marcy sitting silent on the stairs. "Inez left in a kind of a hurry, didn't she? Was anything the matter with her?"

Marcy nodded. "She got mad."

Mrs. Peake chuckled. "Got mad, did she? Well, I daresay she'll get over it. Not that you'll miss much if she doesn't. I'm going over to Mrs. Parrish's a minute. Do you want to go along?"

Marcy shook her head, and at Mrs. Peake's reminding look added, "No, thank you, Grandmother."

"Well, I'll be back soon. Better get out in the sunshine awhile. Tomorrow we'll have a little talk and get things straightened out."

What things? Marcy wondered as she trudged back up the stairs to the bedroom. What was there to have a little talk about?

She sat down again on the edge of the bed and pondered. What was the matter with her? Inez had got mad and gone home even, and Marcy did not care. She did not care at all. She was even glad.

Had Mrs. Peake heard what Inez had said about Auntie? What Mrs. Colton had said—that the Crittenden family had been going to pieces for years and that everybody knew it? "I don't know that the Crittenden stock was ever so all-fired good as some people have made it out to be," Grandmother Peake had once said; so

probably she would agree with Mrs. Colton. But even that would not matter if Auntie herself had not once given voice to the same appalling pronouncement. "The family's going to the dogs, and there's nothing I can do to stop it," Auntie had said.

Was there perhaps something Marcy could do to stop it? Was there a link between her and the anguished past? Was there within her any strength that might one day restore strength to the Crittenden name? She pushed aside the curtain at the window. There lay the town where Grandpa had loomed tall. Along these streets lived people who would remember him all their lives, who would tell their children stories of his exploits.

Nobody would remember Auntie very long. Yet Grandpa had done a cruel and dreadful thing—perhaps more than one cruel and dreadful thing—and Auntie, who knew everything, whose words were beacons and whose visions sang, had been the one to pay the price.

Strange world, where justice took such crooked ways. Yet somehow stirring world, somehow exciting. Marcy was glad Inez had gone home; she was glad Grandmother Peake had gone out. She wanted to be alone, she did not quite know why.

She had a strange new feeling that matched her heartbreak ill, a feeling that partook somehow of power. There was detachment in it; Marcy discovered a desire to draw aside, like a spectator at a play, and watch her heart being broken. If the Crittenden family was to go to pieces, she wanted to stand and see it crumble, that the last sad echo of its falling might be forever stored away in her mind. She found herself wishing, with an intensity that made her feel half guilty, half afraid, that she had gone into Uncle Jay's parlor while Auntie lay like ivory on her bier and had kissed Auntie on the brow. Her shuddering recoil from that icy contact, she knew as well as though she had experienced it, would not have been all horror. There would have been a pleasure in it. She would have known something about death that she had now lost her chance to learn.

What good this chilly knowledge would have done her Marcy did not know, nor now, as she sat shamed beneath the onslaught of her unbecomingly mixed emotions, did she have the faintest intimation of their deeper meaning. But she did know that she had no weapons against them. The covert rebellion of her conscience—she had loved Auntie, she had, she had! her heart was certainly breaking at Auntie's death!—was as powerless as a feather in the wind. The restless, resistless, unfathomable desire that so often filled her breast was stirring her now in a way it had never stirred her before. It was like a fever or a pain.

What was it, then, what could it be she wanted? Had Grandpa perhaps known yearnings impossible to explain, and tried to seize upon them by means of what his daughter had called his two-for-a-penny political ambitions? Had Auntie suffered this intransigent burning, that she turned to her bitter medicine to forget? Had Papa, casting away his life in its thirtieth year, grown too desperate of this ignorance to endure it longer? Did Uncle Jay in St. Louis and Jefferson City do battle with liquor against invading forces he neither invited nor understood? Did Grandma—

But no. Grandma was not a member by birth of this strange family of tormented souls. Grandma had but married her Major and opened her door to destruction.

Marcy, a Crittenden born, looked at her reflection in the bedroom mirror and drew a long breath of acceptance. "I reckon I'll go to pieces too," she thought, not entirely without complacency.

—32—

IN THIS prophecy, however, Marcy reckoned without her Grandmother Peake. That managerial woman went about the overhauling of her little granddaughter's habits with a promptness and vigor that left Marcy all but breathless. She had not lived three days in her new home before she realized that, although she might

go to pieces if her destiny so ordered, she would do extremely well to make sure that her Grandmother Peake did not catch her at it.

She was immediately given many little tasks to do, and her fingers, untrained as a baby's for anything but the minor-muscle operations involved in desk and blackboard work at school, fumbled hopelessly at first over even the simplest of them. Her memory, too, was constantly playing her false. If she remembered to put away her wraps when she came in from school, she left the door open or forgot to wipe her feet. If she scraped her shoe soles meticulously and closed the door firmly and quietly behind her, she was sure to put the leftover foods from dinner into the refrigerator without removing the serving spoons. There seemed no end to Grandmother Peake's requirements and no possibility whatever of meeting them.

Yet she earnestly wanted to meet them, for she had found almost at once that Grandmother Peake with a free hand was another person from Grandmother Peake "minding her own business." Marcy no longer heard herself called "honey-pie" and "baby child"; Mrs. Peake was not given to endearments. But when she was pleased she had a winning look to bestow, and the little girl soon came to covet this above any other possible reward. Grandmother Peake's "I knew you could do it if you wanted to" was sweeter music to her ears than all of Grandma's wheedlings.

This was one great surprise, and Godfrey was another. For he did not bark at Marcy, after all. He simply ignored her. Days and even weeks went by without his seeming to know that she was there. Yet on her tenth birthday, incredibly, he brought home a five-dollar gold piece and laid it beside her plate.

Marcy stared at it with dilated eyes. If Beelzebub himself had shot up through the floor in a burst of brimstone smoke and deposited a five-dollar gold piece in front of her she could not have been much more taken aback. She hardly knew whether she dared put forth her hand and take it.

Godfrey grinned faintly. "Don't you want it?"

Marcy nodded, her round enormous eyes on his face. "Thank you," she stammered.

"You're welcome." Godfrey addressed himself to his dinner.

Marcy had been given her mother's room, and Mrs. Peake had made her enough dresses to enable her to discard Diane's. This room and these dresses, as well as all her other personal possessions, were placed in Marcy's own care; she must keep the room in order, see that her clothing was included in the weekly bundle made ready for the laundress to take away, and iron her dresses when they were returned. Did she fail in any detail of these duties, Mrs. Peake's unique and highly effective method of punishment was to attend to it herself in a sort of wordless fury, making as much noise about it as possible.

Marcy, cringing inwardly at every bang of the iron, every bumping, exasperated thrust and flourish of the dust mop, suffered from this too-eloquent forbearance as no actual punishment could have made her suffer. She had always been as sensitive as a barometer to the atmosphere surrounding her, and she found Grandmother Peake's displeasure too dreadful for contemplation.

Needless to say, she made progress. It was not long before she could iron quite acceptably, and she went about her other tasks with a briskness worthy of Grandmother Peake herself. She even came to enjoy them most of the time; nobody could be more delightful to work with than Grandmother Peake when she was pleased. She was full of unexpected and surprising little turns of mind; she knew many engagingly ridiculous old folk songs and sang them lustily as she and Marcy cleared up the dinner dishes together; she had an endless store of fascinating personal anecdotes to tell.

Gossip was something new to Marcy. Mrs. Crittenden's piety had kept her from indulging in it to any extent, and Cynthia had had no interest whatever in the affairs of her neighbors. Marcy found it enjoyable beyond words to listen to Mrs. Peake's racy

comments on the Methodist minister's black-and-white-checked Canton flannel nightshirt, which he wore absent-mindedly about the parsonage with all the lights turned on, or her dryly reminiscent stories of the town's most prosperous (and most pretentious) citizen, whom she could remember carrying home a paper sack blown up to deceive his neighbors into thinking he had been able to buy himself something to eat. In some obscure department of her mind Marcy was more than delighted with these stories. They fed, unmistakably if inadequately, the secret yearning that oppressed her.

"Goodness, child," Mrs. Peake exclaimed on one occasion, "nobody could ever tell you enough stories to satisfy you. Don't you ever get tired of listening to these yarns?"

Marcy shook her head. "I wouldn't ever get tired. They're funny." She had lost her shyness where Grandmother Peake was concerned; she could talk freely now. She placed the last dish carefully in the drainer. "I could listen till—till the last syllable of recorded time," she added, well enough pleased to display her familiarity with Shakespeare, and glancing sidewise to see whether Grandmother Peake noticed the expertness with which she was wringing out the dish mop.

Mrs. Peake looked down at her. "Why, you little owl!" she said half disapprovingly. "Where on earth did you pick that up?"

Marcy laughed. "Auntie used to read it to me all the time. Don't you like poetry, Grandmother?"

"I always liked Byron. 'Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean, roll!'—and see if I care," Mrs. Peake replied briskly, pulling down the sleeves of her linen house frock. "Hang this towel over there for me, Marcy, if you please—and if you don't please, do it anyway."

Marcy laughed and hung away the towel. She felt warm all over at the thought that Grandmother Peake was beginning to like her. Grandmother Peake's liking would be worth having; she was a wonderful woman. She had disposed of Miss Flossie Bee Reilly

less than two weeks after Marcy had come to stay. "Hm," had been her only comment on her granddaughter's account of the latest scholastic outrage. But that afternoon she had visited the school.

"You won't have any more trouble with Miss Reilly, Marcy," she announced that evening. "Or with your grades, either, as long as you do your work." And so it had turned out.

What had Grandmother Peake said or done to Miss Flossie Bee? Marcy had no idea. But it was obvious that nothing and nobody could stand against Grandmother Peake when she was aroused. Or even when she was only interested! Mrs. Peake played Canfield nearly every evening, and she "went out" in two games out of three, as her punctually triumphant chuckle repeatedly testified; yet even Godfrey had never been able to catch her cheating. Marcy could only conclude that the cards, with a fatalistic shudder, flung themselves into the desired sequence as she dealt them.

Mrs. Jolly Hunt was also summarily dismissed. "Could I go to church every Sunday instead of Sunday school, Grandmother?" Marcy had suggested.

"Why not?" Mrs. Peake replied absently. Then, on an afterthought, she looked at Marcy over her glasses. "But, on the other hand, why?"

Marcy colored. "I—I don't like Mrs. Hunt," she confessed.

Mrs. Peake shrugged her shoulders. "Small blame to you. Neither do I. She calls apricots appricots. Go to church if you want to. You're plenty big enough. It's all right with me."

Marcy, relieved, summoned courage for a question that had often occurred to her. "Why don't you ever go, Grandmother, except when there's a revival?"

Mrs. Peake chuckled as she began her deal. "I fell out with 'em over the missionary society," she explained. "As long as they had a decent Ladies' Aid I did go, and put out twice as much work as any of the rest of 'em, if I do say it myself. But then Mit Henley had the bright idea of turning the Aid into a society for foreign

missions, and they all took out after her like sheep. I don't believe in spoiling good heathen to make poor Christians." She snapped a card down on the table. "Besides, when I was in Chicago at the Fair I saw a darky in a lavender suit, as it is, with spats on." She adjusted her spectacles and glared at Marcy as though the child were herself to blame. "Foreign missions, forsooth!"

The connection between foreign missions and the well-dressed colored gentleman in Chicago was not clear to Marcy, but seemed sufficiently so to Mrs. Peake. She was rather disposed to such inconsequences, as well as to a dogged habit of maintaining her position in argument in spite of all opposition, even the opposition of recognized authority. "It's a misprint," she would say calmly when Godfrey cited Webster or the encyclopedia in proof of some contention of his. "Misprints have been heard of before now, Godfrey."

"Mamma, for Christ's sake, a misprint over fifteen columns?" Godfrey would close the book with a bang. "Do be reasonable!"

Mrs. Peake would smile maddeningly and blandly, her opinion obviously unchanged. Marcy, a fascinated onlooker, was sure that nobody else on earth could ever have been like Grandmother Peake. She could do everything; she knew everybody and everything about everybody; she dismissed Miss Flossie Bee Reilly and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* with equal and unruffled aplomb. She even manufactured her own antiques; Marcy, coming in from school one afternoon, found her putting a final coat of mahogany stain on Grandfather Peake's old pine office chair. "There!" she said with a chuckle of satisfaction. "That's as good a Windsor chair as the one Emma Britton's great-aunt sent her, any day. Isn't it?"

Marcy agreed. She had already been in the household long enough to know that it would be as much as her life was worth to disagree, or ever again to refer to the renovated relic otherwise than as Grandmother's Windsor chair. The chair would take its place beside the cut-glass decanters in the dining room, which,

although tacitly accepted as both antiques and heir-looms, bore a disturbingly exact resemblance to a pair Marcy had seen prominently advertised in Altman's mail-order catalogue.

This inrush of fresh-made tradition was no bad thing for Marcy; perhaps, as her grandmother had suggested, she had grown a little owlsh from her long seclusion in the company of Cynthia and Shakespeare. But she was responsive and receptive, only too eager to laugh and learn. A hearty camaraderie sprang up between her and Mrs. Peake, and the taciturn Godfrey, returning at evening from his office, had frequently to resign himself to the spectacle of his mother and his niece, setting the table together, singing with unabashed hilarity at the tops of their voices:

*Oh, the miller got drowned in his dam,
And the weaver got hung on his yarn,
But the Devil clapped his claws
On the little tailor boy
With the broadcloth under his arm!*

—33—

WHAT REMAINED of the winter twinkled past in a succession of sunny, snowy landscapes, bright, shallow pools where the late snows had melted, clear, quivering oblongs of lemon-colored light across Grandmother Peake's well-polished floors. The whole world looked different to Marcy. She had a new feeling of practical competence; she knew how to do lots of things now! Nobody could call her a helpless baby any more.

Grandmother Peake was even teaching her to make the famous bread. She loved the warm, sweet, substantial smell in the kitchen on baking Saturdays; she loved the warm, resilient, oddly flesh-like feel of the smooth, yeasty dough beneath her fingers. She

drank in the healthy normality of the Peake household as though it had been milk and she half starving. At last she was like the other girls and had a home like theirs.

Though she had died for it, Marcy would never have confessed to her envy of the other girls while that envy still existed. Probably, indeed, she had never fully realized that she envied them. But now she knew that she had. She had coveted their security and their uniformity. Each of them had a brisk, busy, talkative mamma and a gruff, authoritative papa, whose word was law; she had had Auntie and Grandma and Uncle Jay, who were different somehow—better, of course, but still different. Now she had Grandmother Peake, who was just like the other girls' mothers, only more interesting; and she had Godfrey, who, she reflected proudly, was ten times as awe-inspiring as the most formidable papa of them all.

Grandmother Peake's approval, so hard at first to gain, was delightfully familiar to Marcy before the winter ended. She had even overheard Mrs. Peake bragging of her, one day, to an afternoon caller. "Marcy's all right if you just give her a chance," she had said, chuckling; and Marcy, though even then she realized that this overweening satisfaction partook of Mrs. Peake's habitual complacency toward anything that belonged or could be attributed to herself, from the Windsor chair to Godfrey's presumable intellectual superiority, was flooded with triumph at the words. Recalling how often Grandma, in the old days, had praised her daughter-in-law Agnes as "just like my own daughter to me," Marcy dared to dream that someday, maybe, Grandmother Peake would speak of herself in some such affectionate manner. "You turned out to be the best daughter I had, after all, Marcy," she might say.

No. That was going too far. Grandmother Peake would never say that Marcy was better than Mamma had been. But maybe she would think her as good, would love her just as much.

Maybe she even did already. Marcy's heart sang at the thought.

Her days were full of brisk activity, plans, conversations with Grandmother, novel enterprises and projects. Her past life darkened and diminished, diminished and darkened. In the shadowy moments before she fell asleep she sometimes saw it as a strange medallion, framed in one of the scrolled gilt diamonds of the old Crittenden dining-room wallpaper, across which flitted the colors and shapes of a remembered tale: the winglike, upspringing curve of a harp and white fingers sweeping across it; a woman and a dog together and trees in a midnight gale. The shapes and shadows of fear, the highlights of beauty, succeeded each other as before, but all now were reduced and subdued, moving farther and farther away. Even Grandma, who came every week from Uncle Jay's to see her, seemed shrunken by this distance, immaterial and unreal.

And in fact Mrs. Crittenden nowadays approached the immaterial. She was very frail. Her manner, too, was changed; it was marked by a hesitating timidity that in spite of her natural gentleness had never characterized her before. Marcy, unconsciously comparing her tentativeness, her indecisive soft inflections, with Mrs. Peake's clear tones and vigorous approach to life, felt mildly patronizing toward Grandma.

"Why, honey-pie, your ironing's just beautiful!" Mrs. Crittenden exclaimed one afternoon, having come in to find Mrs. Peake away from home and Marcy busy at the board in the sunny dining room.

Marcy chuckled with Mrs. Peake's own complacency. "It has to be," she replied. "Grandmother won't do it for me, and she won't let me go out unless I look all right."

Mrs. Crittenden smiled politely. "You and your Grandmother Peake"—she set slight jealous emphasis on the "Peake"—"get along pretty well after all, don't you, honey?"

"Oh, yes." Marcy was airy. "We get along fine. I think Grandmother's just a wonder." She hung her nicely ironed frock over the back of a chair.

Mrs. Crittenden's mouth trembled, and a fleeting anger sparkled in her eyes. "Well, she's not," she retorted shortly and with dignity. "She's no wonder, even if you and she both think she is." Her hurt was too much for her; she rose and started toward the door. But then she paused. "No, Grandma didn't mean to say that, honey; don't you feel bad," she said gently. "Grandma's glad as glad can be——"

Her voice broke. "That's right. You be a good girl and help Mrs. Peake all you can."

Her pathetic "Don't you feel bad" was quite unnecessary; Marcy was riding high. Only that morning Mrs. Peake had praised her for her upstairs work, complimenting her on the neatness of her room in terms that, for her, were extravagant. Marcy carried her fresh frocks and petticoats upstairs with a swelling satisfaction that came dangerously near to smugness.

She surveyed her personal domain with excusable pride. The room was no prettier than ever, of course, but it was impressively clean and well appointed, and maybe when spring really came Grandmother would show her how to fix it up. Meanwhile it was nice to feel that she had brought about this order, this luster of mirror and windows, this exact looping of ruffled curtains, this suavity of snowy pillow slips and dresser scarf and fringed counterpane, all by herself.

One doubting thought did come into her mind. Aunty, she knew, would never have praised her so just for making up a bed nicely. Aunty would never have spoken of her as Grandmother Peake had spoken, or looked at her as Grandmother Peake had looked, unless she had made herself great like Mark Twain or George Washington or Shakespeare.

This doubt she dismissed by the processes of simple logic. Probably she could never make herself great, anyway. Why not learn to do something she could do, and have her room look nice, and hear Grandmother Peake chuckle and say, "I knew you were smart enough to do it if you wanted to"? She would grow up to

be like Grandmother Peake. Surely that would be all right. Even Aunty herself had once said, "You don't want to be like me, do you?"

Thus Marcy, choosing a sense of values to match her tidy room. There is even a possibility that this attitude might have hardened into permanence had not Mrs. Peake, accompanied, at that moment returned from her shopping. Marcy heard the front door open downstairs and two voices in conversation, her grandmother's and Emma Britton's.

"Sit down, Emma," Mrs. Peake was saying. "I'll just put this in the kitchen and be right back and take your things." She raised her voice. "Marcy! Where are you, Marcy?"

"Upstairs in my room, Grandmother," Marcy called back.

"All right. No, never mind. I didn't want you; I just wanted to know where you were." Her voice died away as she went into the kitchen with her purchases.

Marcy sat down carefully on the edge of her neat bed and waited. She would not go downstairs just yet. She was not nearly so shy as she had been, but she still avoided "company" whenever possible. Her curiosity to hear what was going on would be satisfied, anyway, for the stovepipe hole in the bedroom floor—did Grandmother Peake know it?—made audible everything that was said below.

"Marcy's been with you—how long is it now, Mrs. Peake?" asked Mrs. Britton as her hostess returned to the living room.

"Since right after Christmas. Let me take that for you, Emma." Mrs. Peake carried Mrs. Britton's "things" out into the hall and hung them up. "She's doing right well, too," she said on her return, "considering the way they always spoiled her. She cleaned up her room this morning as well as I could have done it myself."

"Well, bless her heart!" said the visitor. "She's a dear little thing, Mrs. Peake. It's like having another girl of your own, isn't it? I always think grandchildren are just like your own, anyway."

Mrs. Peake chuckled. "Not by a jug full, as far as I'm con-

cerned." She sat down in the squeaky rocker. "There's nobody like your own. Your own are yours. A grandchild belongs partly to another family. Marcy's a nice child, and smart, too. But as for being like one of my own—" She paused eloquently, and Marcy, sitting frozen on the edge of her bed upstairs, visualized her emphatic shake of the head. "Never!"

The conversation continued, but Marcy could hear no more. Grandmother Peake's words filled her room with their clamor. "But as for being like one of my own—never!"

Never.

"Marcy's a nice child, and smart, too. But as for being like one of my own——"

Never.

Of what avail to be nice, to be smart, to have cleaned her room as well as Grandmother Peake could have done it? Of what avail to have striven so hard to please, to have turned her back upon Aunt, Grandpa, Shakespeare, and God that she might give all her powers to becoming Grandmother Peake's acceptable disciple? She was tolerated. ". . . a nice child, and smart, too; but as for being like one of my own . . ."

For this she had hurt poor Grandma, who loved her well enough, grandchild or not, to come every week of her life to see her, no matter how the snow fell or the wind blew; Grandma, who would not have hurt a hair of Marcy's head for anything on earth.

For this she had deluded herself with dreams of having a home, of belonging to someone as Inez belonged to her father and her mother. Mr. and Mrs. Colton were neither as interesting nor as intelligent as Grandmother Peake and Godfrey. But they loved Inez more than anybody would ever love Marcy; they wanted her more than anybody would ever want Marcy; they cared more whether Inez was good or bad, stupid or smart, than anybody would ever care about Marcy.

Godfrey and Grandmother Peake were just being good to

Marcy. They were just keeping her because she had nowhere else to go. That was—that was——

She had not the courage to shape the word, even in her mind.

—34—

“WHAT’S THE matter with you, Marcy?” Mrs. Peake demanded at supper that evening. “You must have caught cold. You look feverish.” She laid her hand on the child’s brow. “I believe she has a little fever, Godfrey. Go on up to bed, Marcy; I’ll wash the dishes tonight. And if you’re not feeling better in the morning, stay in bed. It won’t hurt anything if you miss church for once.”

Marcy obeyed dumbly. She was very willing to conceal her pain. She trudged spiritlessly up the stairs and into her room.

The bed, with its fresh sheets and pillowcases, was inviting, but she could not go to sleep. An overwhelming homesickness had taken possession of her. She wanted Cynthia, not as she had wanted her on that bleak Christmas morning, but in a new way, a way that brought no tears but only a gnawing recurrence of her old desire for something she could not even name. Every time this desire returned upon her it was stronger than before; but it had not assailed her since Grandmother Peake had established the new regime.

Now it was back, insistent and inexorable. It made her long for Cynthia. She was lonely for the splendors Cynthia had opened to her, for the sound of Cynthia’s voice reading words like the singing of angels. Now that she knew how Grandmother Peake regarded her, the bread-and-milk wholesomeness of her life in the past few months seemed to her the last extremity of poverty and desolation. She, Marcy Crittenden, erstwhile companion of those shining spirits “whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,” had been traitor to everything she had once held dear and desirable. In the ecstasy of learning how to sweep a room and drape a cur-

tain and make up a bed so that Grandmother Peake would praise her, she had forgotten everything Auntie had bade her remember.

Words of Cynthia's concerning Mrs. Peake floated back to her: "She'll hate me as long as she lives for choosing to feed Marcy out of a different bowl from hers." Other people, too, had often said or hinted that Marcy's home and her guardianship were unsuitable and probably disastrous, and that it was a good thing she had been rescued young and brought into safe harbor with her Grandmother Peake. Marcy tossed restlessly on her pillow, remembering these things. . . . But had not Auntie's "bowl" been brimming with rubies, great winking bubbles of immortal wine? Auntie had known—what had not Auntie known? All mysteries and all wonders, Marcy was sure, had been to Auntie as an open book. Probably Auntie could even have told her what it was she wanted so. But now it was forever too late to ask.

She slept at length, but fitfully and ill. Morning found her heavy-eyed and listless. Mrs. Peake, coming up to bring milk toast and make sure her condition was not serious, told her to stay in bed.

"It's too bad, on such a beautiful day," she added. "It's spring this morning and no mistake about it. But there'll be other nice days, and we mustn't take any chances." She raised Marcy's window shades, letting in a cascade of early sunshine. "I'm going to be gone a little while. Mrs. Ashe is sick and wants me to come sit with her. Godfrey'll be downstairs if you need anything. Do you want a book, or the cards to play solitaire?"

Marcy shook her head. "Could I have a pencil and paper, Grandmother?"

Mrs. Peake went into Godfrey's room across the hall. "What kind of paper?" she called back.

"Any kind. I just want to draw."

But when she had the paper and Mrs. Peake had gone she did not draw. The thought of Auntie still lay with that disturbing weight upon her mind. She traced Auntie's name again and again

on one of the sheets her grandmother had brought her: Cynthia Clay Crittenden.

It was a beautiful name. She imagined it graven in stone. If Auntie had a monument in the cemetery, that was what it would say: Cynthia Clay Crittenden, aged—

How old had Auntie been? Marcy did not know exactly. Forty? Forty-five?

She thought of the cemetery, of the little china and plaster horses and hens and baskets on the poor graves. She remembered the Suicide's Grave and the bending sprays of bridal wreath in the Crittenden plot. Now Auntie lay there, too, and the grass and flowers, the little wild hepaticas with their delicate veins of rose, would be coming up all over the bare ground where her grave had been piled with snow. But Auntie would neither know nor care. All she had ever wanted was rest.

And now she rested well, with all her troubles gone. Only so many other things were gone too.

Marcy leaned back on her pillows and looked out at the trees against the fathomless blue sky. The apple branches were covered with buds, and yesterday she had seen the green spears of jonquils thrusting up along the garden fence. But it was a different spring from any that Marcy had known before. So many things were gone—Auntie, Grandpa, Reine, the tall old columned house, the spice-smelling garden, the sea shells in the parlor, Auntie's harp, the crossed sabers, the uneven rows of books; the nights of watching, the fear; the hours of magical perception, the strange, winged, powerful, unforgettable things that Auntie had shown her.

Suddenly, quite without forethought, Marcy's fingers tightened on the pencil and she wrote:

Miracles hidden where Auntie lies.

She stared at the words in amazement and mounting excitement. Where had they come from? And what was the feeling that leapt up so wildly inside her?

Something wanted her to do something. Something was leaping, beating. . . . Something wanted out.

She knew what it meant now. Swiftly she pulled another sheet of paper to her and began again, writing the four lines without pause:

*I have seen miracles strange and sweet,
Miracles hidden where Aunty lies,
With the small white blossoms around her feet
And the dust of years on her beautiful eyes.*

Briefly reconsidering, she changed "white" to "wild," "around" to "about" and "beautiful" to "lovely." She added a heading, "My Miracles," and read the lines again, her pulses pounding. It was a poem. She, Marcy Crittenden, had written a poem.

Probably it was not a good poem. But it was not just a jingle like "Winter's Gift," either. "It takes more than meter and rhyme to make a poem, Marcy," Aunty had said. Now Marcy knew what else it took.

She looked with momentary doubt at the last line. Dust of years? Aunty had criticized her for saying what was not true in that other poem. "You know very well you don't like winter, Marcy," she had said.

This was different, though. There was a way in which it could be considered true. It was when you said what you didn't feel that the poem was not true.

A new joy, radiant and all-conquering, welled up in Marcy and spilled down upon her like liquid light. Here was her own true possession, her power, her prize! Nobody could take it from her; nothing could change it. And it was everything: Aunty and Reine and God and the columbine in the garden; Grandma, and the banging of a shutter now burned to ashes, and a swing that once had swung in a paradise tree. Everything was in it somehow, eternal and imperishable; everything lost and gone, everything shining or menacing ahead. Nothing was lost. Nothing would ever be lost again.

Marcy dropped the pencil and lay back against her pillows,

peace and reassurance surrounding her like clear still sunshine. That which had happened to Aunty and to Papa and to Uncle Jay could never now happen to her; the asking voice within her had been answered.

Did it mean that one day she would be a poet, a real poet like Shelley or Shakespeare? Maybe it did, maybe it did not. It mattered little either way. What mattered was a new, sure knowledge that had come to her with the act of creation: the knowledge that her weapons against disaster lay within her. Because of the part of herself she had projected into the world, she realized the puissance of the part that remained. She was Marcy Crittenden; not Grandma's baby, not Aunty's wordless, unquestioning disciple, not Grandmother Peake's new possession to be molded into creditable shape. She was a human being in her own right, with two feet to stand on, two hands to work with and a mind through which to pour herself into fulfillment.

It made everything different. Why had she ever felt that she must choose between Aunty's standards and Grandmother Peake's? From now on she could draw what she wanted from both without fully partaking of either. She could go ahead and love Grandmother now without worrying lest Grandmother fail to love her in return. She could think of Aunty with joy and without desire. She would never need anybody so much again.

She thought of Grandpa, and to her surprise her recent bitterness toward him was all gone. She wished that she might tell him what had come to her. She pictured him listening, this time with respect. "Growing up, Marcy, are you?" he might say soberly.

The stillness in the room was like the stillness that follows music. Marcy could not tell how long she lay there drifting and dreaming. She had a sense of Cynthia's near presence and knew that Cynthia would never die while she, Marcy, lived. Perhaps, if not through Marcy, then through some spirit yet to be clothed in flesh, that passionate mind might still reach fruition and glory.

The sun was high when Grandmother Peake returned. "How

are you by this time, Marcy? Feeling better?" she inquired at the door a few moments later.

"I feel fine," Marcy said. "I'll get dressed and help you with dinner, Grandmother, shall I?"

"I don't know why not, if you're well enough." Mrs. Peake smiled at the eagerness in her eyes. "I'm getting so I miss you if you're not there."

Marcy dressed herself as quickly as she could. But before she went downstairs she stood for a moment at her window, the new bright joy spilling from her like dew from a tremulous leaf. She was happier than she had ever been in her life. Had not the first robin of the year at that moment alighted, chirping, on one of the budded sprays of the apple tree outside, she must herself have tried to burst into song.

IN THE little southern town where the Crittendens lived, legend had it that old Major Crittenden, twenty years dead, still thumped about the house in his Civil War uniform.

But had any of the townspeople seen this spectre, they would have felt more at ease than they did with his flesh-and-blood descendant, the beautiful, proud Miss Cynthia Crittenden who held herself aloof from her neighbors, never leaving the house in daylight.

Everyone knew there was something strange about Cynthia Crittenden. Everyone was sure that she tyrannized her gentle, unworldly mother. Everyone disapproved of the way she brought up nine-year-old Marcy, her orphan niece.

But when the good housekeepers criticized Marcy because she had not been taught to bake bread or iron her clothes or exhibit the proper reverence for these useful talents, Cynthia just laughed. "Never be irreverent, Marcy," she said, "it has dire consequences. You'll be struck by a thunderbolt or, at the very least, by a shaft of intelligence."

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY



132 656

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY